



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

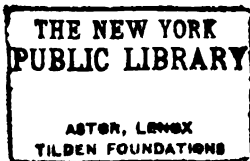
NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 07576407 0

*Autograph Edition limited to 972
copies, of which this is No. 212.*

May A. Ward





LADY KITTY BRISTOL

EDITED BY
HENRY WALPOLE
OF STRATTON
AND
JOSEPH STERNER

TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I



NEW YORK AND LONDON
WILLIAM & BROTHERS
*PUBLISHERS * * * MCMV*



THE
WOMAN
OF
THE
FUTURE

THE
WOMAN
OF
THE
FUTURE

125000
125000
125000

THE MARRIAGE OF WILLIAM ASHE

*A NOVEL BY
MRS. HUMPHRY WARD
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY ALBERT STERNER*

✓

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I



NEW YORK
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

*NEW YORK AND LONDON
HARPER & BROTHERS
PUBLISHERS * * MCMV*

BY WEN
JULIA
HARRIS

OF

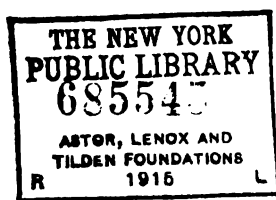
✓

VOL. I



HOW TO PUBLIC LEAD

NEW YORK AND LONDON
HARPER & BROTHERS
PUBLISHERS * * MCMV



WROTE
BY
WILLIAM

Copyright, 1904, 1905, by HARPER & BROTHERS.

All rights reserved.

Published March, 1905.

TO
D. M. W.
DAUGHTER AND FRIEND
I INSCRIBE THIS BOOK

MARCH, 1905

NEW YORK
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

1807 1808
1809 1810
1811 1812

Contents

	PAGE
PART I.—ACQUAINTANCE	I
PART II.—THREE YEARS AFTER	125

Illustrations

LADY KITTY BRISTOL	<i>Frontispiece</i>
LADY TRANMORE AND MARY LYSTER	<i>Facing page 6</i>
"A SLIM GIRL IN WHITE AT THE FAR END OF THE LARGE ROOM"	" 44
"HE STOOD LOOKING OUT INTO THE NIGHT"	" 72
"KITTY SAT BESIDE THE CHILD, MOTIONLESS, FOR AN HOUR"	" 148
THE FINISHING TOUCHES	" 200
"CLIFFE IN THE DRAWING-ROOM READING ALOUD TO KITTY"	" 262
"HE GATHERED HER IN HIS ARMS"	" 278

PART I

ACQUAINTANCE

“Just oblige me and touch
With your scourge that minx Chloe, but don't hurt her much.”

The Marriage of William Ashe

I

HE ought to be here," said Lady Tranmore, as she turned away from the window.

Mary Lyster laid down her work. It was a fine piece of church embroidery, which, seeing that it had been designed for her by no less a person than young Mr. Burne Jones himself, made her the envy of her pre-Raphaelite friends.

"Yes, indeed. You made out there was a train about twelve."

"Certainly. They can't have taken more than an hour to speechify after the declaration of the poll. And I know William meant to catch that train if he possibly could."

"And take his seat this evening?"

Lady Tranmore nodded. She moved restlessly about the room, fidgeting with a book here and there, and evidently full of thoughts. Mary Lyster watched her a little longer, then quietly took up her work again. Her air of well-bred sympathy, the measured ease of her movements, contrasted with Lady Tranmore's impatience. Yet in truth she was listening no less sharply

The Marriage of William Ashe

than her companion to the sounds in the street outside.

Lady Tranmore made her way to the window, and stood there looking out on the park. It was the week before Easter, and the plane-trees were not yet in leaf. But a few thorns inside the park railings were already lavishly green and there was a glitter of spring flowers beside the park walks, not showing, however, in such glorious abundance as became the fashion a few years later. It was a mild afternoon and the drive was full of carriages. From the bow-window of the old irregular house in which she stood, Lady Tranmore could watch the throng passing and repassing, could see also the traffic in Park Lane on either side. London, from this point of sight, wore a cheerful, friendly air. The dim sunshine, the white-clouded sky, the touches of reviving green and flowers, the soft air blowing in from a farther window which was open, brought with them impressions of spring, of promise, and rebirth, which insensibly affected Lady Tranmore.

"Well, I wonder what William will do, this time, in Parliament!" she said, as she dropped again into her seat by the fire and began to cut the pages of a new book.

"He is sure to do extremely well," said Miss Lyster.

Lady Tranmore shrugged her shoulders. "My dear—do you know that William has been for eight years—since he left Trinity—one of the idlest young men alive?"

"He had one brief!"

"Yes—somewhere in the country, where all the juniors get one in turn," said Lady Tranmore. "That was the year he was so keen and went on circuit,

The Marriage of William Ashe

and never missed a sessions. Next year nothing would induce him to stir out of town. What has he done with himself all these eight years? I can't imagine."

"He has grown—uncommonly handsome," said Mary Lyster, with a momentary hesitation as she threaded her needle afresh.

"I never remember him anything else," said Lady Tranmore. "All the artists who came here and to Narrowways wanted to paint him. I used to think it would make him a spoiled little ape. But nothing spoiled him."

Miss Lyster smiled. "You know, Cousin Elizabeth—and you may as well confess it at once!—that you think him the ablest, handsomest, and charmingest of men!"

"Of course I do," said Lady Tranmore, calmly. "I am certain, moreover—now—that he will be Prime Minister. And as for idleness, that, of course, is only a *façon de parler*. He has worked hard enough at the things which please him."

"There—you see!" said Mary Lyster, laughing.

"Not politics, anyway," said the elder lady, reflectively. "He went into the House to please me, because I was a fool and wanted to see him there. But I must say when his constituents turned him out last year I thought they would have been a mean-spirited set if they hadn't. They knew very well he'd never done a stroke for them. Attendances—divisions—perfectly scandalous!"

"Well, here he is, in triumphantly for somewhere else—with all sorts of delightful prospects!"

Lady Tranmore sighed. Her white fingers paused in their task.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"That, of course, is because—now—he's a personage. Everything 'll be made easy for him now. My dear Mary, they talk of England's being a democracy!"

The speaker raised her handsome shoulders; then, as though to shake off thoughts of loss and grief which had suddenly assailed her, she abruptly changed the subject.

"Well—work or no work—the first thing we've got to do is to marry him."

She looked up sharply. But not the smallest tremor could she detect in Mary Lyster's gently moving hand. There was, however, no reply to her remark.

"Don't you agree, Polly?" said Lady Tranmore, smiling.

Her smile—which still gave great beauty to her face—was charming, but a little sly, as she observed her companion.

"Why, of course," said Miss Lyster, inclining her head to one side that she might judge the effect of some green shades she had just put in. "But that surely will be made easy for him, too."

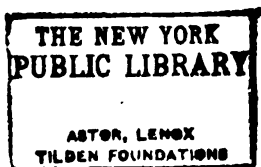
"Well, after all, the girls can't propose! And I never saw him take any interest in a girl yet—outside his own family, of course," added Lady Tranmore, hastily.

"No—he does certainly devote himself to the married women," replied Miss Lyster, in the half-absent tone of one more truly interested in her embroidery than in the conversation.

"He would sooner have an hour with Madame d'Es-trées than a week with the prettiest miss in London. That's quite true, but I vow it's the girls' own fault!"



LADY TRANMORE AND MARY LYSER



The Marriage of William Ashe

They should stand on their dignity—snub the creatures more! In my young days—”

“Ah, there wasn’t a glut of us then,” said Mary, calmly. “Listen!”—she held up her hand.

“Yes,” said Lady Tranmore, springing up. “There he is.”

She stood waiting. The door flew open, and in came a tall young man.

“William, how late you are!” said Lady Tranmore, as she flew into his arms.

“Well, mother, are you pleased?”

Her son held her at arm’s-length, smiling kindly upon her.

“Of course I am,” said Lady Tranmore. “And you—are you horribly tired?”

“Not a bit. Ah, Mary!—how do you do?”

Miss Lyster had risen, and the cousins shook hands.

“But I don’t deny it’s very jolly to come back—out of all that beastly scrimmage,” said the new member, as he threw himself into an arm-chair by the fire with his hands behind his head, while Lady Tranmore prepared him a cup of tea.

“I expect you’ve enjoyed it,” said Miss Lyster, also moving towards the fire.

“Well, when you’re in it there’s a certain excitement in wondering how you’re going to come out of it! But one might say that, of course, of the infernal regions.”

“Not quite,” said Mary Lyster, smiling demurely.

“Polly! you *are* a Tory. Everybody else’s hell has moved—but yours! Thank you, mother,” as Lady Tranmore gave him tea. Then, stretching out his great frame in lazy satisfaction, he turned his brown eyes from

The Marriage of William Ashe

one lady to the other. "I say, mother, I haven't seen anything as good-looking as you—or Polly there, if she'll forgive me—for weeks."

"Hold your tongue, goose," said his mother, as she replenished the teapot. "What—there were no pretty girls—not one?"

"Well, they didn't come my way," said William, contentedly munching at bread-and-butter. "I have gone through all the usual humbug—and perjured my soul in all the usual ways—without any consolation worth speaking of."

"Don't talk nonsense, sir," said Lady Tranmore. "You know you like speaking—and you like compliments—and you've had plenty of both."

"You didn't read me, mother!"

"Didn't I?" she said, smiling. He groaned, and took another piece of tea-cake.

"My own family at least, don't you think, might omit that?"

"H'm, sir— So you didn't believe a word of your own speeches?" said Lady Tranmore, as she stood behind him and smoothed his hair back from his forehead.

"Well, who does?" He looked up gayly and kissed the tips of her fingers.

"And it's in that spirit you're going back into the House?" Mary Lyster threw him the question—with a slight pinching of the lips—as she resumed her work.

"Spirit? What do you mean, Polly? One plays the game, of course—and it has its moments—its hot corners, so to speak—or I suppose no one would play it!"

"And the goal?" She lifted a gently disapproving

The Marriage of William Ashe

face, in a movement which showed anew the large comeliness of head and neck.

"Why—to keep the other fellows out, of course!" He lifted an arm and drew his mother down to sit on the edge of his chair.

"William, you're not to talk like that," said Lady Tranmore, decidedly, laying her cheek, however, against his hand the while. "It was all very well when you were quite a free-lance—but now— Oh! never mind Mary—she's discreet—and she knows all about it."

"What—that they're thinking of giving me Hickson's place? Parham has just written to me—I found the letter down-stairs—to ask me to go and see him."

"Oh! it's come?" said Lady Tranmore, with a start of pleasure. Lord Parham was the Prime Minister. "Now don't be a humbug, William, and pretend you're not pleased. But you'll have to work, mind!" She held up an admonishing finger. "You'll have to answer letters, mind!—you'll have to keep appointments, mind!"

"Shall I? . . . Ah!—Hudson—"

He turned. The butler was in the room.

"His lordship, my lady, would like to see Mr. William before dinner if he could make it convenient."

"Certainly, Hudson, certainly," said the young man. "Tell his lordship I'll be with him in ten minutes."

Then, as the butler departed—"How's father, mother?"

"Oh! much as usual," said Lady Tranmore, sadly.

"And you?"

He laid his arm boyishly round her waist, and looked up at her, his handsome face all affection and life. Mary

The Marriage of William Ashe

Lyster, observing them, thought them a remarkable pair—he in the very prime and heyday of brilliant youth, she so beautiful still, in spite of the filling-out of middle life—which, indeed, was at the moment somewhat toned and disguised by the deep mourning, the sweeping crape and dull silk in which she was dressed.

"I'm all right, dear," she said, quietly, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Now, go on with your tea. Mary—feed him! I'll go and talk to father till you come."

She disappeared, and William Ashe approached his cousin.

"She is better?" he said, with an anxiety that became him.

"Oh yes! Your election has been everything to her—and your letters. You know how she adores you, William."

Ashe drew a long breath.

"Yes—isn't it bad luck?"

"William!"

"For her, I mean. Because, you know—I can't live up to it. I know it's her doing—bless her!—that old Parham's going to give me this thing. And it's a perfect scandal!"

"What nonsense, William!"

"It is!" he maintained, springing up and standing before her, with his hands in his pockets. "They're going to offer me the Under-Secretaryship for Foreign Affairs, and I shall take it, I suppose, and be thankful. And do you know"—he dropped out the words with emphasis—"that I don't know a word of German—and I can't talk to a Frenchman for half an hour without

The Marriage of William Ashe

disgracing myself. There—that's how we're governed!"

He stood staring at her with his bright large eyes—amused, yet strangely detached—as though he had very little to do with what he was talking about.

Mary Lyster met his look in some bewilderment, conscious all the time that his neighborhood was very agreeable and stirring.

"But every one says—you speak so well on foreign subjects."

"Well, any fool can get up a Blue Book. Only—luckily for me—all the fools don't. That's how I've scored sometimes. Oh! I don't deny that—I've scored!" He thrust his hands deeper into his pockets, his whole tall frame vibrant, as it seemed to her, with will and good-humor.

"And you'll score again," she said, smiling. "You've got a wonderful opportunity, William. That's what the Bishop says."

"Much obliged to him!"

Ashe looked down upon her rather oddly.

"He told me he had never believed you were such an idler as other people thought you—that he felt sure you had great endowments, and that you would use them for the good of your country, and"—she hesitated slightly—"of the Church. I wish you'd talk to him sometimes, William. He sees so clearly."

"Oh! does he?" said Ashe.

Mary had dropped her work, and her face—a little too broad, with features a trifle too strongly marked—was raised towards him. Its pale color had passed into a slight blush. But the more strenuous expression had

The Marriage of William Ashe

somehow not added to her charm, and her voice had taken a slightly nasal tone.

Through the mind of William Ashe, as he stood looking down upon her, passed a multitude of flying impressions. He knew perfectly well that Mary Lyster was one of the maidens whom it would be possible for him to marry. His mother had never pressed her upon him, but she would certainly acquiesce. It would have been mere mock modesty on his part not to guess that Mary would probably not refuse him. And she was handsome, well provided, well connected—oppressively so, indeed; a man might quail a little before her relations. Moreover, she and he had always been good friends, even when as a boy he could not refrain from teasing her for a slow-coach. During his electoral weeks in the country the thought of “Polly” had often stolen kindly upon his rare moments of peace. He must marry, of course. There was no particular excitement or romance about it. Now that his elder brother was dead and he had become the heir, it simply had to be done. And Polly was very nice—quite sweet-tempered and intelligent. She looked well, moved well, would fill the position admirably.

Then, suddenly, as these half-thoughts rushed through his brain, a breath of something cold and distracting—a wind from the land of *ennui*—seemed to blow upon them and scatter them. Was it the mention of the Bishop—tiresome, pompous fellow—or her slightly pedantic tone—or the infinitesimal hint of “management” that her speech implied? Who knows? But in that moment perhaps the scales of life inclined.

“Much obliged to the Bishop,” he repeated, walking

The Marriage of William Ashe

up and down. "I am afraid, however, I don't take things as seriously as he does. Oh, I hope I shall behave decently—but, good Lord, what a comedy it is! You know the sort of articles"—he turned towards her—"our papers will be writing to-morrow on my appointment. They'll make me out no end of a fine fellow—you'll see! And, of course, the real truth is, as you and I know perfectly well, that if it hadn't been for poor Freddy's death—and mother—and her dinners—and the chaps who come here—I might have whistled for anything of the sort. And then I go down to Ledmenham and stand as a Liberal, and get all the pious Radicals to work for me! It's a humbugging world—isn't it?"

He returned to the fireplace, and stood looking down upon her—grinning.

Mary had resumed her embroidery. She, too, was dimly conscious of something disappointing.

"Of course, if you choose to take it like that, you can," she said, rather tartly. "Of course, everything can be made ridiculous."

"Well, that's a blessing, anyway!" said Ashe, with his merry laugh. "But look here, Mary, tell me about yourself. What have you been doing?—dancing—riding, eh?"

He threw himself down beside her, and began an elder-brotherly cross-examination, which lasted till Lady Tranmore returned and begged him to go at once to his father.

When he returned to the drawing-room, Ashe found his mother alone. It was growing dark, and she was sitting idle, her hands in her lap, waiting for him.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"I must be off, dear," he said to her. "You won't come down and see me take my seat?"

She shook her head.

"I think not. What did you think of your father?"

"I don't see much change," he said, hesitating.

"No, he's much the same."

"And you?" He slid down on the sofa beside her and threw his arm round her. "Have you been fretting?"

Lady Tranmore made no reply. She was a self-contained woman, not readily moved to tears. But he felt her hand tremble as he pressed it.

"I sha'n't fret now"—she said after a moment—"now that you've come back."

Ashe's face took a very soft and tender expression.

"Mother, you know—you think a great deal too much of me—you're too ambitious for me."

She gave a sound between a laugh and a sob, and, raising her hands, she smoothed back his curly hair and held his face between them.

"When do you see Lord Parham?" she asked.

"Eight o'clock—in his room at the House. I'll send you up a note."

"You'll be home early?"

"No—don't wait for me."

She dropped her hands, after giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"I know where you're going! It's Madame d'Es-trées' evening."

"Well—you don't object?"

"Object?" She shrugged her shoulders. "So long as it amuses you— You won't find *one* woman there to-night."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Last time there were two," he said, smiling, as he rose from the sofa.

"I know—Lady Quantock—and Mrs. Mallory. Now they've deserted her, I hear. What fresh gossip has turned up I don't know. Of course," she sighed, "I've been out of the world. But I believe there have been developments."

"Well, I don't know anything about it—and I don't think I want to know. She's very agreeable, and one meets everybody there."

"*Everybody*. Ungallant creature!" she said, giving a little pull to his collar, the set of which did not please her.

"Sorry! Mother!"—his laughing eyes pursued her—"Do you want to marry me off directly?—I know you do!"

"I want nothing but what you yourself should want. Of course, you must marry."

"The young women don't care twopence about me!"

"William!—be a bear if you like, but not an idiot!"

"Perfectly true," he declared; "not the dazzlers and the high-fliers, anyway—the only ones it would be an excitement to carry off."

"You know very well," she said, slowly, "that now you might marry anybody."

He threw his head back rather haughtily.

"Oh! I wasn't thinking about money, and that kind of thing. Well, give me time, mother—don't hurry me! And now I'd better stop talking nonsense, change my clothes, and be off. Good-bye, dear—you shall hear when the job's perpetrated!"

"William, really!—don't say these things—at least to

The Marriage of William Ashe

anybody but me. You understand very well"—she drew herself up rather finely—"that if I hadn't known, in spite of your apparent idleness, you would do any work they set you to do, to your own credit and the country's, I'd never have lifted a finger for you!"

William Ashe laughed out.

"Oh! intriguing mother!" he said, stooping again to kiss her. "So you admit you did it?"

He went off gayly, and she heard him flying upstairs three steps at a time, as though he were still an untamed Eton boy, and there were no three weeks' hard political fighting behind him, and no interview which might decide his life before him.

He entered his own sitting-room on the second floor, shut the door behind him, and glanced round him with delight. It was a large room looking on a side street, and obliquely to the park. Its walls were covered with books—books which almost at first sight betrayed to the accustomed eye that they were the familiar companions of a student. Almost every volume had long paper slips inside it, and when opened would have been found to contain notes and underlinings in a somewhat reckless and destructive abundance. A large table, also loaded untidily with books and papers, stood in the centre of the room; many of them were note-books, stored with evidences of the most laborious and patient work; a Cambridge text lay beside them face downward, as he had left it on departure. His mother's housekeeper, who had been one of his best friends from babyhood, was the only person allowed to dust his room—but on the strict condition that she replaced everything as she found it.

The Marriage of William Ashe

He took up the volume, and plunged a moment headlong into the Greek chorus that met his eye. "*Jolly!*" he said, putting it down with a sigh of regret. "These beastly politics!"

And he went muttering to his dressing-room, summoning his valet almost with ill-temper. Yet half his library was the library of a politician, admirably chosen and exhaustively read.

The footman who answered his call understood his moods and served him at a look. Ashe complained hotly of the brushing of his dress-clothes, and worked himself into a fever over the set of his tie. Nevertheless, before he left he had managed to get from the young man the whole story of his engagement to the under-house-maid, giving him thereupon some bits of advice, jocular but trenchant, which James accepted with a readiness quite unlike his normal behavior in the circles of his class.

II

ASHE took his seat, dined, and saw the Prime Minister. These things took time, and it was not till past eleven that he presented himself in the hall of Madame d'Estrées' house in St. James's Place. Most of her guests were already gathered, but he mounted the stairs together with an old friend and an old acquaintance, Philip Darrell, one of the ablest writers of the moment, and Louis Harman, artist and man of fashion, the friend of duchesses and painter of portraits, a person much in request in many worlds.

"What a *cachet* they have, these houses!" said Harman, looking round him. "St. James's Place is the top!"

"Where else would you expect to find Madame d'Estrées?" asked Darrell, smiling.

"Yes—what taste she has! However, it was I really who advised her to take the house."

"Naturally," said Darrell.

Harman threw a dubious look at him, then stopped a moment, and with a complacent proprietary air straightened an engraving on the staircase wall.

"I suppose the dear lady has a hundred slaves of the lamp, as usual," said Ashe. "You advise her about her house—somebody else helps her to buy her wine—"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Not at all, my dear fellow," said Harman, offended—"as if I couldn't do that!"

"Hullo!" said Darrell, as they neared the drawing-room door. "What a crowd there is!"

For as the butler announced them, the din of talk which burst through the door implied indeed a multitude—much at their ease.

They made their way in with difficulty, shaping their course towards that corner in the room where they knew they should find their hostess. Ashe was greeted on all sides with friendly words and congratulations, and a passage was opened for him to the famous "blue sofa" where Madame d'Estrées sat enthroned.

She looked up with animation, broke off her talk with two elderly diplomats who seemed to have taken possession of her, and beckoned Ashe to a seat beside her.

"So you're in? Was it a hard fight?"

"A hard fight? Oh no! One would have had to be a great fool not to get in."

"They say you spoke very well. I suppose you promised them everything they wanted—from the crown downward?"

"Yes—all the usual harmless things," said Ashe.

Madame d'Estrées laughed; then looked at him across the top of her fan.

"Well!—and what else?"

"You can't wait for your newspaper?" he said, smiling, after a moment's pause.

She shrugged her shoulders good-humoredly.

"Oh! I *know*—of course I know. Is it as good as you expected?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"As good as—" The young man opened his mouth in wonder. "What right had I to expect anything?"

"How modest! All the same, they want you—and they're very glad to get you. But you can't save them."

"That's not generally expected of Under-Secretaries, is it?"

"A good deal's expected of *you*. I talked to Lord Parham about you last night."

William Ashe flushed a little.

"Did you? Very kind of you."

"Not at all. I didn't flatter you in the least. Nor did he. But they're going to give you your chance!"

She bent forward and lightly patted the sleeve of his coat with the fingers of a very delicate hand. In this sympathetic aspect, Madame d'Estrées was no doubt exceedingly attractive. There were, of course, many people who were not moved by it; to whom it was the conjuring of an arch pretender. But these were generally of the female sex. Men, at any rate, lent themselves to the illusion. Ashe, certainly, had always done so. And to-night the spell still worked; though as her action drew his particular attention to her face and expression, he was aware of slight changes in her which recalled his mother's words of the afternoon. The eyes were tired; at last he perceived in them some slight signs of years and harass. Up till now her dominating charm had been a kind of timeless softness and sensuousness, which breathed from her whole personality—from her fair skin and hair, her large, smiling eyes. She put, as it were, the question of age aside. It was difficult to think of her as a child; it had been impossible to imagine her as an old woman.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Well, this is all very surprising," said Ashe, "considering that four months ago I did not matter an old shoe to anybody."

"That was your own fault. You took no trouble. And besides—there was your poor brother in the way."

Ashe's brow contracted.

"No, that he never was," he said, with energy. "Freddy was never in anybody's way—least of all in mine."

"You know what I mean," she said, hastily. "And you know what friends he and I were—poor Freddy! But, after all, the world's the world."

"Yes—we all grow on somebody's grave," said Ashe. Then, just as she became conscious that she had jarred upon him, and must find a new opening, he himself found it. "Tell me!" he said, bending forward with a sudden alertness—"who is that lady?"

He pointed out a little figure in white, sitting in the opening of the second drawing-room; a very young girl apparently, surrounded by a group of men.

"Ah!" said Madame d'Estrées—"I was coming to that—that's my girl Kitty—"

"Lady Kitty!" said Ashe, in amazement. "She's left school? I thought she was quite a little thing."

"She's eighteen. Isn't she a darling? Don't you think her very pretty?"

Ashe looked a moment.

"Extraordinarily bewitching!—unlike other people?" he said, turning to the mother.

Madame d'Estrées raised her eyebrows a little, in apparent amusement.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"I'm not going to describe Kitty. She's indescribable. Besides—you must find her out. Do go and talk to her. She's to be half with me, half with her aunt—Lady Grosville."

Ashe made some polite comment.

"Oh! don't let's be conventional!" said Madame d'Estrées, flirting her fan with a little air of weariness—"It's an odious arrangement. Lady Grosville and I, as you probably know, are not on terms. She says atrocious things of me—and I—" the fair head fell back a little, and the white shoulders rose, with the slightest air of languid disdain—"well, bear me witness that I don't retaliate! It's not worth while. But I know that Grosville House can help Kitty. So!" Her gesture, half ironical, half resigned, completed the sentence.

"Does Lady Kitty like society?"

"Kitty likes anything that flatters or excites her."

"Then of course she likes society. Anybody as pretty as that—"

"Ah! how sweet of you!" said Madame d'Estrées, softly—"how sweet of you! I like you to think her pretty. I like you to say so."

Ashe felt and looked a trifle disconcerted, but his companion bent forward and added—"I don't know whether I want you to flirt with her! You must take care. Kitty's the most fantastic creature. Oh! my life now 'll be very different. I find she takes all my thoughts and most of my time!"

There was something extravagant in the sweetness of the smile which emphasized the speech, and altogether, Madame d'Estrées, in this new maternal aspect, was not as agreeable as usual. Part of her charm perhaps had

The Marriage of William Ashe

always lain in the fact that she had no domestic topics of her own, and so was endlessly ready for those of other people. Those, indeed, who came often to her house were accustomed to speak warmly of her "unselfishness"—by which they meant the easy patience with which she could listen, smile, and flatter.

Perhaps Ashe made this tacit demand upon her, no less than other people. At any rate, as she talked cooingly on about her daughter, he would have found her tiresome for once but for some arresting quality in that small, distant figure. As it was, he followed what she said with attention, and as soon as she had been recaptured by the impatient Italian Ambassador, he moved off, intending slowly to make his way to Lady Kitty. But he was caught in many congratulations by the road, and presently he saw that his friend Darrell was being introduced to her by the old habitué of the house, Colonel Warington, who generally divided with the hostess the "lead" of these social evenings.

Lady Kitty nodded carelessly to Mr. Darrell, and he sat down beside her.

"That's a cool hand for a girl of eighteen!" thought Ashe. "She has the airs of a princess—except for the chatter."

Chatter indeed! Wherever he moved, the sound of the light hurrying voice made itself persistently heard through the hum of male conversation.

Yet once, Ashe, looking round to see if Darrell could be dislodged, caught the chatterer silent, and found himself all at once invaded by a slight thrill, or shock.

What did the girl's expression mean?—what was she thinking of? She was looking intently at the crowded

The Marriage of William Ashe

room, and it seemed to Ashe that Darrell's talk, though his lips moved quickly, was not reaching her at all. The dark brows were drawn together, and beneath them the eyes looked sorely out. The delicate lips were slightly, piteously open, and the whole girlish form in its young beauty appeared, as he watched, to shrink together. Suddenly the girl's look, so wide and searching, caught that of Ashe; and he moved impulsively forward.

"Present me, please, to Lady Kitty," he said, catching Warington's arm.

"Poor child!" said a low voice in his ear.

Ashe turned and saw Louis Harman. The tone, however—allusive, intimate, patronizing—in which Harman had spoken, annoyed him, and he passed on without taking any notice.

"Lady Kitty," said Warington, "Mr. Ashe wishes to be presented to you. He is an old friend of your mother's. Congratulate him—he has just got into Parliament."

Lady Kitty drew herself up, and all trace of the look which Ashe had observed disappeared. She bowed, not carelessly as she had bowed to Darrell, but with a kind of exaggerated stateliness, not less girlish.

"I never congratulate anybody," she said, shaking her head, "till I know them."

Ashe opened his eyes a little.

"How long must I wait?" he said, smiling, as he drew a chair beside her.

"That depends. Are you difficult to know?" She looked up at him audaciously, and he on his side could not take his eyes from her, so singular was the small, sparkling face. The hair and skin were very fair, like

The Marriage of William Ashe

her mother's, the eyes dark and full of fire, the neck most daintily white and slender, the figure undeveloped, the feet and hands extremely small. But what arrested him was, so to speak, the embodied contradiction of the personality—as between the wild intelligence of the eyes and the extreme youth, almost childishness, of the rest.

He asked her if she had ever known any one confess to being easy to know.

"Well, I'm easy to know," she said, carelessly, leaning back; "but, then, I'm not worth knowing."

"Is one allowed to find out?"

"Oh yes—of course! Do you know—when you were over there, I *willed* that you should come and talk to me, and you came. Only," she sat up with animation, and began to tick off her sentences on her fingers—"Don't ask me how long I've been in town. Don't ask where I was in Paris. Don't inquire whether I like balls! You see, I warn you at once"—she looked up frankly—"that we mayn't lose time."

"Well, then, I don't see how I'm ever to find out," said Ashe, stoutly.

"Whether I'm worth knowing?" She considered, then bent forward eagerly. "Look here! I'll just tell you everything in a lump, and then that 'll do—won't it? Listen. I'm just eighteen. I was sent to the Sœurs Blanches when I was thirteen—the year papa died. I *didn't* like papa—I'm very sorry, but I didn't! However, that's by-the-way. In all those years I have only seen maman once—she doesn't like children. But my aunt Grosville has some French relations—very, *very* 'comme il faut,' you understand—and I used to go and

The Marriage of William Ashe

stay with them for the holidays. Tell me!—did you ever hunt in France?"

"Never," said Ashe, startled and amused by the sudden glance of enthusiasm that lit up the face and expressed itself in the clasped hands.

"Oh! it's such heaven," she said, lifting her shoulders with an extravagant gesture—"such *heaven*! First there are the old dresses—the men look such darlings!—and then the horns, and the old ways they have—*si noble*!—*si distingué*!—not like your stupid English hunting. And then the dogs! Ah! the *dogs*"—the shoulders went higher still; "do you know my cousin Henri actually gave me a puppy of the great breed—the breed, you know—the Dogs of St. Hubert. Or at least he *would* if maman would have let me bring it over. And she wouldn't! Just think of that! When there are thousands of people in France who'd give the eyes out of their head for one. I cried all one night—Allons!—*faut pas y penser*!"—she shook back the hair from her eyes with an impatient gesture. "My cousins have got a *château*, you know, in the Seine-et-Oise. They've promised to ask me next year—when the Grand-Duke Paul comes—if I'll promise to behave. You see, I'm not a bit like French girls—I had so many affairs!"

Her eyes flashed with laughter.

Ashe laughed too.

"Are you going to tell me about them also?"

She drew herself up.

"No! I play fair, always—ask anybody! Oh, I *do* want to go back to France so badly!" Once more she was all appeal and childishness. "Anyway, I won't stay in England! I have made up my mind to that!"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"How long has it taken?"

"A fortnight," she said, slowly—"just a fortnight."

"That hardly seems time enough—does it?" said Ashe. "Give us a little longer."

"No—I—I hate you!" said Lady Kitty, with a strange drop in her voice. Her little fingers began to drum on the table near her, and to Ashe's intense astonishment he saw her eyes fill with tears.

Suddenly a movement towards the other room set in around them. Madame d'Estrées could be heard giving directions. A space was made in the large drawing-room—a little table appeared in it, and a footman placed thereon a glass of water.

Lady Kitty looked up.

"Oh, that *detestable* man!" she said, drawing back. "No—I can't, I can't bear it. Come with me!" and beckoning to Ashe she fled with precipitation into the farther part of the inner drawing-room, out of her mother's sight. Ashe followed her, and she dropped panting and elate into a chair.

Meanwhile the outer room gathered to hear the recitation of some *vers de société*, fondly believed by their author to be of a very pretty and Praedian make. They certainly amused the company, who laughed and clapped as each neat personality emerged. Lady Kitty passed the time either in a running commentary on the reciter, which occasionally convulsed her companion, or else in holding her small hands over her ears.

When it was over, she drew a long breath.

"How *maman can!* Oh! how *bête* you English are to applaud such a man! You have only *one* poet,

The Marriage of William Ashe

haven't you—one living poet? Ah! I shouldn't have laughed if it had been he!"

"I suppose you mean Geoffrey Cliffe?" said Ashe, amused. "Nobody abroad seems ever to have heard of any one else."

"Well, of course, I just long to know him! Every one says he is so dangerous!—he makes all the women fall in love with him. That's *delicious*! He shouldn't make me! Do you know him?"

"I knew him at Eton. We were 'swished' together," said Ashe.

She inquired what the phrase might mean, and when informed, flushed hotly, denouncing the English school system as quite unfit for gentlemen and men of honor. Her French cousins would sooner die than suffer such a thing. Then in the midst of her tirade she suddenly paused, and fixing Ashe with her brilliant eyes, she asked him a surprising question, in a changed and steady voice:

"Is Lady Tranmore not well?"

Ashe was fairly startled.

"Thank you, I left her quite well. Have you—"

"Did maman ask her to come to-night?"

It was Ashe's turn to redden.

"I don't know. But—we are in mourning, you see, for my brother."

Her face changed and softened instantly.

"Are you? I'm so sorry. I—I always say something stupid. Then—Lady Tranmore used to come to maman's parties—before—"

She had grown quite pale; it seemed to him that her hand shook. Ashe felt an extraordinary pang of pity and concern.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"It's I, you see, to whom your mother has been kind," he said, gently. "We're an independent family; we each make our own friends."

"No—" she said, drawing a deep breath. "No, it's not that. Look at that room."

Following her slight gesture, Ashe looked. It was an old, low-ceiled room, panelled in white and gold, showing here and there an Italian picture—saint, or holy family, agreeable school-work—from which might be inferred the tastes if not the *expertise* of Madame d'Estrées' first husband, Lord Blackwater. The floor was held by a plentiful collection of seats, neither too easy nor too stiff; arranged by one who understood to perfection the physical conditions at least which should surround the "great art" of conversation. At this moment every seat was full. A sea of black coats overflowed on the farther side, into the staircase landing, where through the open door several standing groups could be seen; and in the inner room, where they sat, there was but little space between its margin and themselves. It was a remarkable sight; and in his past visits to the house Ashe had often said to himself that the elements of which it was made up were still more remarkable. Ministers and Opposition; ambassadors, travellers, journalists; the men of fashion and the men of reform; here a French republican official, and beyond him, perhaps, a man whose ancestors were already of the most ancient *noblesse* in Saint-Simon's day; artists, great and small, men of letters good and indifferent; all these had been among the guests of Madame d'Estrées, brought to the house, each of them, for some quality's sake, some power of keeping up the social game.

The Marriage of William Ashe

But now, as he looked at the room, not to please himself but to obey Lady Kitty, Ashe became aware of a new impression. The crowd was no less, numerically, than he had seen it in the early winter; but it seemed to him less distinguished, made up of coarser and commoner items. He caught the face of a shady financier long since banished from Lady Tranmore's parties; beyond him a red-faced colonel, conspicuous alike for doubtful money-matters and matrimonial trouble; and in a farther corner the sallow profile of a writer whose books were apt to rouse even the man of the world to a healthy and contemptuous disgust. Surely these persons had never been there of old; he could not remember one of them.

He looked again, more closely. Was it fancy, or was the gathering itself aware of the change which had passed over it? As a whole, it was certainly noisier than of old; the shouting and laughter were incessant. But within the general uproar certain groups had separated from other groups, and were talking with a studied quiet. Most of the habitués were still there; but they held themselves apart from their neighbors. Were the old intimacy and solidarity beginning to break up?—and with them the peculiar charm of these “evenings,” a charm which had so far defied a social boycott that had been active from the first?

He glanced back uncertainly at Lady Kitty, and she looked at him.

“Why are there no ladies?” she said, abruptly.

He collected his thoughts.

“It—it has always been a men's gathering. Perhaps for some men here—I'm sorry there are such barbarians, Lady Kitty!—that makes the charm of it. Look at that

The Marriage of William Ashe

old fellow there! He is a most famous old boy. Everybody invites him—but he never stirs out of his den but to come here. My mother can't get him—though she has tried often."

And he pointed to a dishevelled, gray-haired gentleman, short in stature, round in figure, something, in short, like an animated egg, who was addressing a group not far off.

Lady Kitty's face showed a variety of expressions.

"Are there many parties like this in London? Are the ladies asked, and don't come? I—I don't—understand!"

Ashe looked at her kindly.

"There is no other hostess in London as clever as your mother," he declared, and then tried to change the subject; but she paid no heed.

"The other day, at Aunt Grosville's," she said, slowly, "I asked if my two cousins might come to-night, and they looked at me as though I were mad! Oh, *do* talk to me!" She came impulsively nearer, and Ashe noticed that Darrell, standing against the doorway of communication, looked round at them in amusement. "I liked your face—the very first moment when I saw you across the room. Do you know—you're—you're very handsome!" She drew back, her eyes fixed gravely, intently upon him.

For the first time Ashe was conscious of annoyance.

"I hope you won't mind my saying so"—his tone was a little short—"but in this country we don't say those things. They're not—quite polite."

"Aren't they?" Her eyebrows arched themselves and her lips fell in penitence. "I always called my French

The Marriage of William Ashe

cousin, Henri la Fresnay, *beau!* I am sure he liked it!" The accent was almost plaintive.

Ashe's natural impulse was to say that if so the French cousin must be an ass. But all in a moment he found himself seized with a desire to take her little hands in his own and press them—she looked such a child, so exquisite, and so forlorn. And he did in fact bend forward confidentially, forgetting Darrell.

"I want you to come and see my mother?" he said, smiling at her. "Ask Lady Grosville to bring you."

"May I? But—" She searched his face, eager still to pour out the impulsive, uncontrolled confidences that were in her mind. But his expression stopped her, and she gave a little, resentful sigh.

"Yes—I'll come. *We*—you and I—are a little bit cousins too—aren't we? We talked about you at the Grosvilles."

"Was our 'great-great' the same person?" he said, laughing. "Hope it was a decent 'great-great.' Some of mine aren't much to boast of. Well, at any rate, let's *be* cousins—whether we are or no, shall we?"

She assented, her whole face lighting up.

"And we're going to meet—the week after next!" she said, triumphantly, "in the country."

"Are we?—at Grosville Park. That's delightful."

"And *then* I'll ask your advice—I'll make you tell me—a hundred things! That's a bargain—mind!"

"Kitty! Come and help me with tea—there's a darling!"

Lady Kitty turned. A path had opened through the crowd, and Madame d'Estrées, much escorted, a vision of diamonds and pale-pink satin, appeared, leading the way

The Marriage of William Ashe

to the supper-room, and the light "refection," accompanied by much champagne, which always closed these evenings.

The girl rose, as did her companion also. Madame d'Estrées threw a quick, half-satirical glance at Ashe, but he had eyes only for Lady Kitty, and her transformation at the touch of her mother's voice. She followed Madame d'Estrées with a singular and conscious dignity, her white skirts sweeping, her delicately fine head thrown back on her thin neck and shoulders. The black crowd closed about her; and Ashe's eyes pursued the slender figure till it disappeared.

Extreme youth—innocence—protest—pain—was it with these touching and pleading impressions, after all, that his first talk with Kitty Bristol had left him? Yet what a little *étourdie*! How lacking in the reserves, the natural instincts and shrinkings of the well-bred English girl!

Darrell and Ashe walked home together, through a windy night which was bringing out April scents even from the London grass and lilac-bushes.

"Well," said Darrell, as they stepped into the Green Park, "so you're safely in. Congratulate you, old fellow. Anything else?"

"Yes. They've offered me Hickson's place. More fools they, don't you think?"

"Good! Upon my word, Bill, you've got your foot in the stirrup now! Hope you'll continue to be civil to poor devils like me."

The speaker looked up smiling, but neither the tone nor the smile was really cordial. Ashe felt the em-

The Marriage of William Ashe

barrassment that he had once or twice felt before in telling Darrell news of good fortune. There seemed to be something in Darrell that resented it—under an outer show of felicitation.

However, they went on talking of the political moment and its prospects, and of Ashe's personal affairs. As to the last, Darrell questioned, and Ashe somewhat reluctantly replied. It appeared that his allowance was to be largely raised, that his paralyzed father, in fact, was anxious to put him in possession of a substantial share in the income of the estates, that one of the country-houses was to be made over to him, and so on.

"Which means, of course, that they want you to marry," said Darrell. "Well, you've only to throw the handkerchief."

They were passing a lamp as he spoke, and the light shone on his long, pale face—a face of discontent—with its large sunken eyes and hollow cheeks.

Ashe treated the remark as "rot," and endeavored to get away from his own affairs by discussing the party they had just left.

"How does she get all those people together? It's astonishing!"

"Well, I always liked Madame d'Estrées well enough," said Darrell, "but, upon my word, she has done a beastly mean thing in bringing that girl over."

"You mean?"—Ashe hesitated—"that her own position is too doubtful?"

"Doubtful, my dear fellow!" Darrell laughed unpleasantly. "I never really understood what it all meant till the other night when old Lady Grosville took and told me—more at any rate than I knew before.

The Marriage of William Ashe

The Grosvilles are on the war-path, and they regard the coming of this poor child as the last straw."

"Why?" said Ashe.

Darrell gave a shrug. "Well, you know the story of Madame d'Estrées' step-daughter — old Blackwater's daughter?"

"Ah! by his first marriage? I knew it was something about the step-daughter," said Ashe, vaguely.

Darrell began to repeat his conversation with Lady Grosville. The tale threatened presently to become a black one indeed; and at last Ashe stood still in the broad walk crossing the Green Park.

"Look here," he said, resolutely, "don't tell me any more. I don't want to hear any more."

"Why?" asked Darrell, in amazement.

"Because"—Ashe hesitated a moment. "Well, I don't want it to be made impossible for me to go to Madame d'Estrées' again. Besides, we've just eaten her salt."

"You're a good friend!" said Darrell, not without something of a sneer.

Ashe was ruffled by the tone, but tried not to show it. He merely insisted that he knew Lady Grosville to be a bit of an old cat; that of course there was something up; but it seemed a shame for those at least who accepted Madame d'Estrées' hospitality to believe the worst. There was a curious mixture of carelessness and delicacy in his remarks, very characteristic of the man. It appeared as though he was at once too indolent to go into the matter, and too chivalrous to talk about it.

Darrell presently maintained a rather angry silence. No man likes to be checked in his story, especially when

The Marriage of William Ashe

the check implies something like a snub from his best friend. Suddenly, memory brought before him the little picture of Ashe and Lady Kitty together—he bending over her, in his large, handsome geniality, and she looking up. Darrell felt a twinge of jealousy—then disgust. Really, men like Ashe had the world too easily their own way. That they should pose, besides, was too much.

III

RATHER more than a fortnight after the evening at Madame d'Estrées', William Ashe found himself in a Midland train on his way to the Cambridgeshire house of Lady Grosville. While the April country slipped past him—like some blanched face to which life and color are returning—Ashe divided his time between an idle skimming of the Saturday papers and a no less idle dreaming of Kitty Bristol. He had seen her two or three times since his first introduction to her—once at a ball to which Lady Grosville had taken her, and once on the terrace of the House of Commons, where he had strolled up and down with her for a most amusing and stimulating hour, while her mother entertained a group of elderly politicians. And the following day she had come alone—her own choice—to take tea with Lady Tranmore, on that lady's invitation, as prompted by her son. Ashe himself had arrived towards the end of the visit, and had found a Lady Kitty in the height of the fashion, stiff mannered, and flushed to a deep red by her own consciousness that she could not possibly be making a good impression. At sight of him she relaxed, and talked a great deal, but not wisely; and when she was gone, Ashe could get very little opinion of any kind from his mother, who had, however, expressed a wish that she should come and visit them in the country.

The Marriage of William Ashe

Since then he frankly confessed to himself that in the
unpleasant of his new official and administrative work he
had been a good deal haunted by memories of this strange
woman, her eyes, her grace—even in her fits of proud shy-
ness and the way in which, as he had put her into her
carriage for the visit to Lady Tranmore, her tiny hand
had seemed to him a mute, astonishing appeal. Haunted,
too, by what he heard of her fortunes and surroundings.
What was the truth of Madame d'Estrées' situation?
During the preceding weeks some ugly rumors had
been circulating in that quarter,
of a certain height, of crisis and pos-
sibility. When these rumors were met by
Colonel Warrington, the old
of Madame d'Estrées' household, had
been averted,
so well known and
with this phase of
was well aware, not
where, so to
truths had
history
hard upon
her to her
her to
line of
there was a
moment of
which
a man

The Marriage of William Ashe

whom the girl might profitably marry was to be found among the mother's guests, the influences of Madame d'Estrées' "evenings" were certainly not matrimonial. Still the unforeseen was surely the probable in Lady Kitty's case. What sort of man ought she to marry—what sort of man could safely take the risks of marrying her—with that mother in the background?

He descended at the way-side station prescribed to him, and looked round him for fellow-guests—much as the card-player examines his hand. Mary Lyster, a cabinet minister—filling an ornamental office and handed on from ministry to ministry as a kind of necessary appendage, the public never knew why—the minister's second wife, an attaché from the Austrian embassy, two members of Parliament, and a well-known journalist—Ashe said to himself flippantly that so far the trumps were not many. But he was always reasonably glad to see Mary, and he went up to her, cared for her bag, and made her put on her cloak, with cousinly civility. In the omnibus on the way to the house he and Mary gossiped in a corner, while the cabinet minister and the editor went to sleep, and the two members of Parliament practised some courageous French on the Austrian attaché.

"Is it to be a large party?" he asked of his companion.

"Oh! they always fill the house. A good many came down yesterday."

"Well, I'm not curious," said Ashe, "except as to one person."

"Who?"

"Lady Kitty Bristol."

Mary Lyster smiled.

The Marriage of William Ashe

Since then he frankly confessed to himself that in the intervals of his new official and administrative work he had been a good deal haunted by memories of this strange child, her eyes, her grace—even in her fits of proud shyness—and the way in which, as he had put her into her cab after the visit to Lady Tranmore, her tiny hand had lingered in his, a mute, astonishing appeal. Haunted, too, by what he heard of her fortunes and surroundings. What was the real truth of Madame d'Estrées' situation? During the preceding weeks some ugly rumors had reached Ashe of financial embarrassment in that quarter, of debts risen to mountainous height, of crisis and possible disappearance. Then these rumors were met by others, to the effect that Colonel Warrington, the old friend and support of the D'Estrées' household, had come to the rescue, that the crisis had been averted, and that the three weekly evenings, so well known and so well attended, would go on; and with this phase of the story there mingled, as Ashe was well aware, not the slightest breath of scandal, in a case where, so to speak, all was scandal.

And meanwhile what new and dolorous truths had Lady Kitty been learning as to her mother's history and her mother's position? By Jovel it *was* hard upon the girl. Darrell was right. Why not leave her to her French friends and relations?—or relinquish her to Lady Grosville? Madame d'Estrées had seen little or nothing of her for years. She could not, therefore, be necessary to her mother's happiness, and there was a real cruelty in thus claiming her, at the very moment of her entrance into society, where Madame d'Estrées could only stand in her way. For although many a man

The Marriage of William Ashe

whom the girl might profitably marry was to be found among the mother's guests, the influences of Madame d'Estrées' "evenings" were certainly not matrimonial. Still the unforeseen was surely the probable in Lady Kitty's case. What sort of man ought she to marry—what sort of man could safely take the risks of marrying her—with that mother in the background?

He descended at the way-side station prescribed to him, and looked round him for fellow-guests—much as the card-player examines his hand. Mary Lyster, a cabinet minister—filling an ornamental office and handed on from ministry to ministry as a kind of necessary appendage, the public never knew why—the minister's second wife, an attaché from the Austrian embassy, two members of Parliament, and a well-known journalist—Ashe said to himself flippantly that so far the trumps were not many. But he was always reasonably glad to see Mary, and he went up to her, cared for her bag, and made her put on her cloak, with cousinly civility. In the omnibus on the way to the house he and Mary gossiped in a corner, while the cabinet minister and the editor went to sleep, and the two members of Parliament practised some courageous French on the Austrian attaché.

"Is it to be a large party?" he asked of his companion.

"Oh! they always fill the house. A good many came down yesterday."

"Well, I'm not curious," said Ashe, "except as to one person."

"Who?"

"Lady Kitty Bristol."

Mary Lyster smiled.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Yes, poor child, I heard from the Grosville girls that she was to be here."

"Why 'poor child'?"

"I don't know. Quite the wrong expression, I admit. It should be 'poor hostess.'"

"Oh!—the Grosvilles complain?"

"No. They're only on tenter-hooks. They never know what she will do next."

"How good for the Grosvilles!"

"You think society is the better for shocks?"

"Lady Grosville can do with them, anyway. What a masterful woman! But I'll back Lady Kitty."

"I haven't seen her yet," said Mary. "I hear she is a very odd-looking little thing."

"Extremely pretty," said Ashe.

"Really?" Mary lifted incredulous eyebrows. "Well, now I shall know what you admire."

"Oh, my tastes are horribly catholic—I admire so many people," said Ashe, with a glance at the well-dressed elegance beside him. Mary colored a little, unseen; and the rattle of the carriage as it entered the covered porch of Grosville Park cut short their conversation.

"Well, I'm glad you got in," said Lady Grosville, in her full, loud voice, "because we are connections. But of course I regard the loss of a seat to our side just now as a great disaster."

"Very grasping, on your part!" said Ashe. "You've had it all your own way lately. Think of Portsmouth!"

Lady Grosville, however, as she met his bantering look, did not find herself at all inclined to think of Ports-

The Marriage of William Ashe

mouth. She was much more inclined to think of William Ashe. What a good-looking fellow he had grown! She heaved an inward sigh, of mingled envy and appreciation, directed towards Lady Tranmore.

Poor Susan indeed had suffered terribly in the death of her eldest son. But the handsomer and abler of the two brothers still remained to her—and the estate was safe. Lady Grosville thought of her own three daughters, plain and almost dowerless; and of that conceited young man, the heir, whom she could hardly persuade her husband to invite, once a year, for appearance sake.

"Why are we so early?" said Ashe, looking at his watch. "I thought I should be disgracefully late."

For he and Lady Grosville had the library to themselves. It was a fine, book-walled room, with giallo antico columns and Adam decoration; and in its richly colored lamp-lit space, the seated figure—stiffly erect—of Lady Grosville, her profile, said by some to be like a horse and by others to resemble Savonarola, the cap of old Venice point that crowned her grizzled hair, her black velvet dress, and the long-fingered, ugly, yet distinguished hands which lay upon her lap, told significantly; especially when contrasted with the negligent ease and fresh-colored youth of her companion.

Grosville Park was rich in second-rate antiques; and there was a Greco-Roman head above the bookcase with which Ashe had been often compared. As he stood now leaning against the fireplace, the close-piled curls, and eyes—somewhat "*à fleur de tête*"—of the bust were undoubtedly repeated with some closeness in the living man. Those whom he had offended by some social carelessness or other said of him when they wished to

The Marriage of William Ashe

run him down, that he was "floridly" handsome; and there was some truth in it.

"Didn't you get the message about dinner?" said Lady Grosville. Then, as he shook his head: "Very remiss of Parkin. I always tell him he loses his head directly the party goes into double figures. We had to put off dinner a quarter of an hour because of Kitty Bristol, who missed her train at St. Pancras, and only arrived half an hour ago. By-the-way, I suppose you have already seen her—at that woman's?"

"I met her a week or two ago, at Madame d'Estrées'," said Ashe, apparently preoccupied with something wrong in the set of his white waistcoat.

"What did you think of her?"

"A charming young lady," said Ashe, smiling. "What else should I think?"

"A lamb thrown to the wolves," said Lady Grosville, grimly. "How that woman *could* do such a thing!"

"I saw nothing lamblike about Lady Kitty," said Ashe. "And do you include me among the wolves?"

Lady Grosville hesitated a moment, then stuck to her colors.

"You shouldn't go to such a house," she said, boldly—"I suppose I may say that without offence, William, as I've known you from a boy."

"Say anything you like, my dear Lady Grosville! So you—believe evil things—of Madame d'Estrées?"

His tone was light, but his eyes sought the distant door, as though invoking some fellow-guest to appear and protect him.

Lady Grosville did not answer. Ashe's look returned to her, and he was startled by the expression of her face.

The Marriage of William Ashe

He had always known and unwillingly admired her for a fine Old Testament Christian, one from whom the language of the imprecatory Psalms with regard to her enemies, personal and political, might have flowed more naturally than from any other person he knew, of the same class and breeding. But this loathing—this passion of contempt—this heat of memory!—these were new indeed, and the fire of them transfigured the old, gray face.

"I have known a fair number of bad people," said Lady Grosville, in a low voice—"and a good many wicked women. But for meanness and vileness combined, the things I know of the woman who was Blackwater's wife have no equal in my experience!"

There was a moment's pause. Then Ashe said, in a voice as serious as her own:

"I am sorry to hear you say that, partly because I like Madame d'Estrées, and partly—because—I was particularly attracted by Lady Kitty."

Lady Grosville looked up sharply. "Don't marry her, William!—don't marry her! She comes of a bad stock."

Ashe recovered his gayety.

"She is your own niece. Mightn't a man dare—on that guarantee?"

"Not at all," said Lady Grosville, unappeased. "I was a hop out of kin. Besides—a Methodist governess saved me; she converted me, at eighteen, and I owe her everything. But my brothers—and all the rest of us!" She threw up her eyes and hands. "What's the good of being mealy mouthed about it? All the world knows it. A good many of us were mad—and I sometimes think I see more than eccentricity in Kitty."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Who was Madame d'Estrées?" said Ashe. Why should he wince so at the girl's name?—in that hard mouth?

Lady Grosville smiled.

"Well, I can tell you a good deal about that," she said. "Ah!—another time!"

For the door opened, and in came a group of guests, with a gush of talk and a rustling of silks and satins.

Everybody was gathered; dinner had been announced; and the white-haired and gouty Lord Grosville was in a state of seething impatience that not even the mild-voiced Dean of the neighboring cathedral, engaged in complimenting him on his speech at the Diocesan Conference, could restrain.

"Adelina, need we wait any longer?" said the master of the house, turning an angry eye upon his wife.

"Certainly not—she has had ample time," said Lady Grosville, and rang the bell beside her.

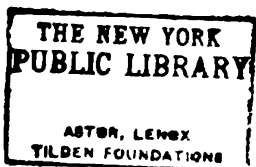
Suddenly there was a whirlwind of noise in the hall, the angry barking of a small dog, the sound of a girl's voice laughing and scolding, the swish of silk skirts. A scandalized butler, obeying Lady Grosville's summons, threw the door open, and in burst Lady Kitty.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," said the new-comer, in a tone of despair. "But I couldn't leave him up-stairs, Aunt Lina! He'd eaten one of my shoes, and begun upon the other. And Julie's afraid of him. He bit her last week. *May* he sit on my knee? I know I can keep him quiet!"

Every conversation in the library stopped. Twenty amazed persons turned to look. They beheld a slim girl in white at the far end of the large room struggling with



**"A SLIM GIRL IN WHITE AT THE FAR END OF THE LARGE
ROOM"**



The Marriage of William Ashe

a gray terrier puppy which she held under her left arm, and turning appealing eyes towards Lady Grosville. The dog, half frightened, half fierce, was barking furiously. Lady Kitty's voice could hardly be heard through the din, and she was crimson with the effort to control her charge. Her lips laughed; her eyes implored. And to add to the effect of the apparition, a marked strangeness of dress was at once perceived by all the English eyes turned upon her. Lady Kitty was robed in the extreme of French fashion, which at that moment was a fashion of flounces; she was much *décolletée*; and her fair, abundant hair, carried to a great height, and arranged with a certain calculated wildness around her small face, was surmounted by a large scarlet butterfly which shone defiantly against the dark background of books.

"Kitty!" said Lady Grosville, advancing indignantly, "what a dreadful noise! Pray give the dog to Parkin at once."

Lady Kitty only held the struggling animal tighter.

"*Please*, Aunt Lina!—I'm afraid he'll bite! But he'll be quite good with me."

"Why *did* you bring him, Kitty? We can't have such a creature at dinner!" said Lady Grosville, angrily.

Lord Grosville advanced behind his wife.

"How do you do, Kitty? Hadn't you better put down the dog and come and be introduced to Mr. Rankine, who is to take you in to dinner?"

Lady Kitty shook her fair head, but advanced, still clinging to the dog, gave a smile and a nod to Ashe, and a bow to the young Tory member presented to her.

"You don't mind him?" she said, a flash of laughter in

The Marriage of William Ashe

her dark eyes. "We'll manage him between us, won't we?"

The young man, dazzled by her prettiness and her strangeness, murmured a hopeful assent. Lord Grosville, with the air of a man determined on dinner though the skies fall, offered his arm to Lady Edith Manley, the wife of the cabinet minister, and made for the dining-room. The stream of guests followed; when suddenly the puppy, perceiving on the floor a ball of wool which had rolled out of Lady Grosville's work-table, escaped in an ecstasy of mischief from his mistress's arm and flew upon the ball. Kitty rushed after him; the wool first unrolled, then caught; the table overturned and all its contents were flung pell-mell in the path of Lady Grosville, who, on the arm of the amused and astonished minister, was waiting in restrained fury till her guests should pass.

"I shall never get over this," said Lady Kitty, as she leaned back in her chair, still panting, and quite incapable of eating any of the foods that were being offered to her in quick succession.

"I don't know that you deserve to," said Ashe, turning a face upon her which was as grave as he could make it. The attention of every one else round the room was also in truth occupied with his companion. There was, indeed, a general buzz of conversation and a general pretence that Lady Kitty's proceedings might now be ignored. But in reality every guest, male or female, kept a stealthy watch on the red butterfly and the sparkling face beneath it; and Ashe was well aware of it.

"I vow it was not my fault," said Kitty, with dignity.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"I was not allowed to have the dog I should have had. You'd never have found a dog of St. Hubert condescending to bedroom slippers! But as I had to have a dog—and Colonel Warington gave me this one three days ago—and he has already ruined half maman's things, and no one could manage him but me, I just had to bring him, and trust to Providence."

"I have been here a good many times," said Ashe, "and I never yet saw a dog in the sanctuary. Do you know that Pitt once wrote a speech in the library?"

"Did he? I'm sure it never made such a stir as Ponto did." Kitty's face suddenly broke into laughter, and she hid it a moment in her hands.

"You brazen it out," said Ashe; "but how are you going to appease Lady Grosville?"

Kitty ceased to laugh. She drew herself up, and looked seriously, observantly at her aunt.

"I don't know. But I must do it somehow. I don't want any more worries."

So changed were her tone and aspect that Ashe turned a friendly examining look upon her.

"Have you been worried?" he said, in a lower voice.

She shrugged her shoulders and made no reply. But presently she impatiently reclaimed his attention, snatching him from the lady he had taken in to dinner, with no scruple at all.

"Will you come a walk with me to-morrow morning?"

"Proud," said Ashe. "What time?"

"As soon as we can get rid of these people," she said, her eye running round the table. Then as it paused and lingered on the face of Mary Lyster opposite, she abruptly asked him who that lady might be.

The Marriage of William Ashe

Ashe informed her.

"Your cousin?" she said, looking at him with a slight frown. "Your cousin? I don't—well, I don't think I shall like her."

"That's a great pity," said Ashe.

"For me?" she said, distrustfully.

"For both, of course! My mother's very fond of Miss Lyster. She's often with us."

"Oh!" said Kitty, and looked again at the face opposite. Then he heard her say behind her fan, half to herself and half to him:

"She does not interest me in the least! She has no ideas! I'm sure she has no ideas. Has she?"

She turned abruptly to Ashe.

"Every one calls her very clever."

Kitty looked contempt.

"That's nothing to do with it. It's not the clever people who have ideas."

Ashe bantered her a little on the meaning of her words, till he presently found that she was too young and unpractised to be able to take his thrusts and return them, with equanimity. She could make a daring sally or reply; but it was still the raw material of conversation; it wanted ease and polish. And she was evidently conscious of it herself, for presently her cheek flushed and her manner wavered.

"I suppose you—everybody—thinks her very agreeable?" she said, sharply, her eyes returning to Miss Lyster.

"She is a most excellent gossip," said Ashe. "I always go to her for the news."

Kitty glanced again.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"I can see that already she detests me."

"In half an hour?"

The girl nodded.

"She has looked at me twice—about. But she has made up her mind—and she never changes." Then with an abrupt alteration of note she looked round the room. "I suppose your English dining-rooms are all like this? One might be sitting in a hearse. And the pictures—no! *Quelles horreurs!*"

She raised her shoulders again impetuously, frowning at a huge full-length opposite of Lord Grosville as M.F.H., a masterpiece indeed of early Victorian vulgarity.

Then suddenly, hastily, with that flashing softness which so often transformed her expression, she turned towards him, trying to make amends.

"But the library—that was *bien*—ah! *tr-rès, tr-rès bien!*"

Her r's rolled a little as she spoke, with a charming effect, and she looked at him radiantly, as though to strike and to make amends were equally her prerogative, and she asked no man's leave.

"You've not yet seen what there is to see here," said Ashe, smiling. "Look behind you."

The girl turned her slim neck and exclaimed. For behind Ashe's chair was the treasure of the house. It was a "Dance of Children," by one of the most famous of the eighteenth-century masters. From the dark wall it shone out with a flower-like brilliance, a vision of color and of grace. The children danced through a golden air, their bodies swaying to one of those "unheard melodies" of art, sweeter than all mortal tunes; their delicate faces

The Marriage of William Ashe

alive with joy. The sky and grass and trees seemed to caress them; a soft sunlight clothed them; and flowers brushed their feet.

Kitty turned back again and was silent. Was it Ashe's fancy, or had she grown pale?

"Did you like it?" he asked her. She turned to him, and for the second time in their acquaintance he saw her eyes floating in tears.

"It is too beautiful!" she said, with an effort—almost an angry effort. "I don't want to see it again."

"I thought it would give you pleasure," said Ashe, gently, suddenly conscious of a hope that she was not aware of the slight look of amusement with which Mary Lyster was contemplating them both.

"So it did," said Kitty, furtively applying her lace handkerchief to her tears; "but"—her voice dropped—"when one's unhappy—very unhappy—things like that—things like *Heaven*—hurt! Oh, what a *fool* I am!" And she sat straightly up, looking round her.

There was a pause; then Ashe said, in another voice:

"Look here, you know this won't do. I thought we were to be cousins."

"Well?" said Kitty, indifferently, not looking at him.

"And I understood that I was to be taken into respectable cousinly counsel?"

"Well?" said Kitty again, crumbling her bread. "I can't do it here, can I?"

Ashe laughed.

"Well, anyhow, we're going to sample the garden tomorrow morning, aren't we?"

"I suppose so," said Kitty. Then, after a moment,

The Marriage of William Ashe

she looked at her right-hand neighbor, the young politician to whom as yet she had scarcely vouchsafed a word.

"What's his name?" she asked, under her breath. Ashe repeated it.

"Perhaps I ought to talk to him?"

"Of course you ought," said Ashe, with smiling decision, and turning to the lady whom he had brought in he left her free.

When the ladies rose, Lady Grosville led the way to the large drawing-room, a room which, like the library, had some character, and a thin elegance of style, not, however, warmed and harmonized by the delightful presence of books. The walls, blue and white in color, were panelled in stucco relief. A few family portraits, stiff handlings of stiff people, were placed each in the exact centre of its respective panel. There were a few cases of china and a few polished tables. A crimson Brussels carpet, chosen by Lady Grosville for its "cheerfulness," covered the floor, and there was a large white sheepskin rug before the fireplace. A few hyacinths in pots, and the bright fire supplied the only gay and living notes—before the ladies arrived.

Still, for an English eye, the room had a certain cold charm, was moreover full of *history*. It hardly deserved at any rate the shiver with which Kitty Bristol looked round it.

But she had little time to dwell upon the room and its meanings, for Lady Grosville approached her with a manner which still showed signs of the catastrophe before dinner.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Kitty, I think you don't know Miss Lyster yet—Mary Lyster—she wants to be introduced to you."

Mary advanced smiling; Kitty held out a limp hand, and they exchanged a few words standing in the centre of the floor, while the other guests found seats.

"What a charming contrast!" said Lady Edith Manley in Lady Grosville's ear. She nodded smiling towards the standing pair—struck by the fine straight lines of Mary's satin dress, the roundness of her fine figure, the oval of her head and face, and then by the little, vibrating, tempestuous creature beside her, so distinguished, in spite of the billowing flounces and ribbons, so direct and significant, amid all the elaboration.

"Kitty is ridiculously overdressed," said Lady Grosville. "I hope we shall soon change that. My girls are going to take her to their woman."

Lady Edith put up her eye-glass slowly and looked at the two Grosville girls; then back at Kitty.

Meanwhile a few perfunctory questions and answers were passing between Miss Lyster and her companion. Mary's aspect as she talked was extremely amiable; one might have called it indulgent, perhaps even by an adjective that implied a yet further shade of delicate superiority. Kitty met it by the same "grand manner" that Ashe had several times observed in her, a manner caught perhaps from some French model, and caricatured in the taking. Her eyes meanwhile took note of Mary's face and dress, and while she listened her small teeth tormented her under-lip, as though she restrained impatience. All at once in the midst of some information that Miss Lyster was lucidly giving, Kitty made an impetuous turn. She had caught some words on the

The Marriage of William Ashe

farther side of the room; and she looked hard, eagerly, at the speaker.

"Who is that?" she inquired.

Mary Lyster, with a sharp sense of interruption, replied that she believed the lady in question was the Grosville's French governess. But in the very midst of her sentence Kitty deserted her, left her standing in the centre of the drawing-room, while the deserter fled across it, and sinking down beside the astonished mademoiselle took the Frenchwoman's hand by assault and held it in both her own.

"Vous parlez Français?—vous êtes Française? Ah! ça me fait tant de bien! Voyons! voyons!—causons un peu!"

And bending forward, she broke into a cataract of French, all the elements of her strange, small beauty rushing, as it were, into flame and movement at the swift sound and cadence of the words, like a dancer kindled by music. The occasion was of the slightest; the Frenchwoman might well show a natural bewilderment. But into the slight occasion the girl threw an animation, a passion, that glorified it. It was like the leap of a wild rain-stream on the mountains, that pours into the first channel which presents itself.

"What beautiful French!" said Lady Edith, softly, to Mary Lyster, who had found a seat beside her.

Mary Lyster smiled.

"She has been at school, of course, in a French convent." Somehow the tone implied that the explanation disposed of all merit in the performance.

"I am afraid these French convent schools are not at all what they should be," said Lady Grosville.

The Marriage of William Ashe

And rising to a pyramidal height, her ample *moiré* dress swelling behind her, her gray head magnificently crowned by its lace cap and black velvet *bandeau*, she swept across the room to where the Dean's wife, Mrs. Winston, sat in fascinated silence observing Lady Kitty. The silence and the attention annoyed her hostess. The first thing to be done with girls of this type, it seemed to Lady Grosville, was to prove to them that they would *not* be allowed to monopolize society.

There are natural monopolies, however, and they are not easy to deal with.

As soon as the gentlemen returned, Mr. Rankine, whom she had treated so badly at dinner, the young agent of the estate, the clergyman of the parish, the Austrian attaché, the cabinet minister, and the Dean, all showed a strong inclination to that side of the room which seemed to be held in force by Lady Kitty. The Dean especially was not to be gainsaid. He placed himself in the seat shyly vacated by the French governess, and crossed his thin, stockinged legs with the air of one who means to take his ease. There was even a certain curious resemblance between him and Kitty, as was noticed from a distance by Ashe. The Dean, who was very much a man of the world, and came of an historic family, was, in his masculine degree, planned on the same miniature scale and with the same fine finish as the girl of eighteen. And he carried his knee-breeches, his apron, and his exquisite white head with a natural charm and energy akin to hers—mellowed though it were by time, and dignified by office. He began eagerly to talk

The Marriage of William Ashe

to her of Paris. His father had been ambassador for a time under Louis Philippe, and he had boyish memories of the great house in the Faubourg St. Honoré, and of the Orleanist ministers and men of letters. And lo! Kitty met him at once, in a glow and sparkle that enchanted the old man. Moreover, it appeared that this much-beflounced young lady could talk; that she had heard of the famous names and the great affairs to which the Dean made allusion; that she possessed indeed a native and surprising interest in matter of the sort; and a manner, above all, with the old, alternately soft and daring, calculated, as Lady Grosville would no doubt have put it, merely to make fools of them.

In her cousins' house, it seemed, she had talked with old people, survivors of the Orleanist and Bourbon régimes—even of the Empire; had sat at their feet, a small, excited hero-worshipper; and had then rushed blindly into the memoirs and books that concerned them. So, in this French world the child had found time for other things than hunting, and the flattery of her cousin Henri? Ashe was supposed to be devoting himself to the Dean's wife; but both he and she listened most of the time to the sallies and the laughter of the circle where Kitty presided.

"My dear young lady," cried the delighted Dean, "I never find anybody who can talk of these things—it is really astonishing. Ah, *now*, we English know nothing of France—nor they of us. Why, I was a mere school-boy then, and I had a passion for their society, and their books—for their *plays*—dare I confess it?"—he lowered his voice and glanced at his hostess—"their plays, above all!"

The Marriage of William Ashe

Kitty clapped her hands. The Dean looked at her, and ran on:

"My mother shared it. When I came over for my Eton holidays, she and I lived at the Théâtre-Français. Ah, those were days! I remember Mademoiselle Mars in 'Hernani.'"

Kitty bounded in her seat. Whereupon it appeared that just before she left Paris she had been taken by a friend to see the reigning idol of the Comédie-Française, the young and astonishing actress, Sarah Bernhardt, as Doña Sol. And there began straightway an excited duet between her and the Dean; a comparison of old and new, a rivalry of heroines, a hot and critical debate that presently silenced all other conversation in the room, and brought Lord Grosville to stand gaping and astounded behind the Dean, reflecting no doubt that this was not precisely the Dean of the Diocesan Conference.

The old man indeed forgot his age, the girl her youth; they met as equals, on poetic ground, till suddenly Kitty, springing up, and to prove her point, began an imitation of Sarah in the great love-scene of the last act, before arresting fate, in the person of Don Ruy, breaks in upon the rapture of the lovers. She absolutely forgot the Grosville drawing-room, the staring Grosville girls, the other faces, astonished or severe, neutral or friendly. Out rolled the tide of tragic verse, fine poetry, and high passion; and though it be not very much to say, it must at least be said that never had such recitation, in such French, been heard before within the walls of Grosville Park. Nor had the lips of any English girl ever dealt there with a poetic diction so unchastened and unashamed. Lady Grosville might well feel as

The Marriage of William Ashe

though the solid frame of things were melting and cracking round her.

Kitty ceased. She fell back upon her chair, smitten with a sudden perception.

"You made me!" she said, reproachfully, to the Dean.

The Dean said another "Brava!" and gave another clap. Then, becoming aware of Lord Grosville's open mouth and eye, he sat up, caught his wife's expression, and came back to prose and the present.

"My dear young lady," he began, "you have the most extraordinary talent—" when Lady Grosville advanced upon him. Standing before him, she majestically signalled to her husband across his small person.

"William, kindly order Mrs. Wilson's carriage."

Lord Grosville awoke from his stupor with a jerk, and did as he was told. Mrs. Wilson, the agent's timid wife, who was not at all aware that she had asked for her carriage, rose obediently. Then the mistress of the house turned to Lady Kitty.

"You recite very well, Kitty," she said, with cold and stately emphasis, "but another time I will ask you to confine yourself to Racine and Corneille. In England we have to be very careful about French writers. There are, however, if I remember right, some fine passages in 'Athalie.'"

Kitty said nothing. The Austrian attaché, who had been following the little incident with the liveliest interest, retired to a close inspection of the china. But the Dean, whose temper was of the quick and chivalrous kind, was roused.

"She recites wonderfully! And Victor Hugo is a

The Marriage of William Ashe

classic, please, my lady—just as much as the rest of them. Ah, well, no doubt, no doubt, there might be things more suitable.” And the old man came wavering down to earth, as the enthusiasm which Kitty had breathed into him escaped, like the gas from a balloon. “But, do you know, Lady Kitty”—he struck into a new subject with eagerness, partly to cover the girl, partly to silence Lady Grosville—“you reminded me all the time so remarkably—in your voice—certain inflections—of your sister—your step-sister, isn’t it?—Lady Alice? You know, of course, she is close to you to-day—just the other side the park—with the Sowerbys?”

The Dean’s wife sprang to her feet in despair. In general it was to her a matter for fond complacency that her husband had no memory for gossip, and was in such matters as innocent and as dangerous as a child. But this was too much. At the same moment Ashe came quickly forward.

“My sister?” said Kitty. “My sister?”

She spoke low and uncertainly, her eyes fixed upon the Dean.

He looked at her with a sudden odd sense of something unusual, then went on, still floundering:

“We met her at St. Pancras on our way down. If I had only known we were to have had the pleasure of meeting you— Do you know, I think she is looking decidedly better?”

His kindly expression as he rose expected a word of sisterly assent. Meanwhile even Lady Grosville was paralyzed, and the words with which she had meant to interpose failed on her lips.

Kitty, too, rose, looking round for something, which

The Marriage of William Ashe

she seemed to find in the face of William Ashe, for her eyes clung there.

"My sister," she repeated, in the same low, strained voice. "My sister Alice? I—I don't know. I have never seen her."

Ashe could not remember afterwards precisely how the incident closed. There was a bustle of departing guests, and from the midst of it Lady Kitty slipped away. But as he came down-stairs in smoking trim, ten minutes later, he overheard the injured Dean wrestling with his wife, as she lit a candle for him on the landing.

"My dear, what did you look at me like that for? What did the child mean? And what on *earth* is the matter?"

IV

AFTER the ladies had gone to bed, on the night of Lady Kitty's recitation, William Ashe stayed up till past midnight talking with old Lord Grosville. When relieved of the presence of his women-kind, who were apt either to oppress him, in the person of his wife, or to puzzle him, in the persons of his daughters, Lord Grosville was not by any means without value as a talker. He possessed that narrow but still most serviceable fund of human experience which the English land-owner, while our English tradition subsists, can hardly escape, if he will. As guardsman, volunteer, magistrate, lord-lieutenant, member—for the sake of his name and his acres—of various important commissions, as military *attaché* even, for a short space, to an important embassy, he had acquired, by mere living, that for which his intellectual betters had often envied him—a certain shrewdness, a certain instinct, as to both men and affairs, which were often of more service to him than finer brains to other persons. But, like most accomplishments, these also brought their own conceit with them. Lord Grosville having, in his own opinion, done extremely well without much book education himself, had but little appreciation for it in others.

Nevertheless he rarely missed a chance of conversation with William Ashe, not because the younger man, in

The Marriage of William Ashe

spite of his past indolence, was generally held to be both able and accomplished, but because the elder found in him an invincible taste for men and women, their fortunes, oddities, catastrophes — especially the latter — similar to his own.

Like Mary Lyster, both were good gossips; but of a much more disinterested type than she. Women indeed as gossips are too apt to pursue either the damnation of some one else or the apotheosis of themselves. But here the stupider no less than the abler man showed a certain broad detachment not very common in women — amused by the human comedy itself, making no profit out of it, either for themselves or morals, but asking only that the play should go on.

The incident, or rather the heroine of the evening, had given Lord Grosville a topic which in the case of William Ashe he saw no reason for avoiding; and in the peace of the smoking - room, when he was no longer either hungry for his dinner or worried by his responsibilities as host, he fell upon his wife's family, and, as though he had been the manager of a puppet-show, unpacked the whole box of them for Ashe's entertainment.

Figure after figure emerged, one more besmirched than another, till finally the most beflecked of all was shaken out and displayed — Lady Grosville's brother and Kitty's father, the late Lord Blackwater. And on this occasion Ashe did not try to escape the story which was thus a second time brought across him. Lord Grosville, if he pleased, had a right to tell it, and there was now a curious feeling in Ashe's mind which had been entirely absent before, that he had, in some sort, a right to hear it.

Briefly, the outlines of it fell into something like this

The Marriage of William Ashe

shape: Henry, fifth Earl of Blackwater, had begun life as an Irish peer, with more money than the majority of his class; an initial advantage soon undone by an insane and unscrupulous extravagance. He was, however, a fine, handsome, voracious gentleman, born to prey upon his kind, and when he looked for an heiress he was not long in finding her. His first wife, a very rich woman, bore him one daughter. Before the daughter was three years old, Lord Blackwater had developed a sturdy hatred of the mother, chiefly because she failed to present him with a son; and he could not even appease himself by the free spending of her money, which, so far as the capital was concerned, was sharply looked after by a pair of trustees, Belfast manufacturers and Presbyterians, to whom the Blackwater type was not at all congenial.

These restrictions presently wore out Lord Blackwater's patience. He left his wife, with a small allowance, to bring up her daughter in one of his Irish houses, while he generously spent the rest of her large income, and his own, and a great deal besides, in London and on the Continent.

Lady Blackwater, however, was not long before she obliged him by dying. Her girl, then twelve years old, lived for a time with one of her mother's trustees. But when she had reached the age of seventeen her father suddenly commanded her presence in Paris, that she might make acquaintance with his second wife.

The new Lady Blackwater was an extremely beautiful woman, Irish, as the first had been, but like her in no other respect. Margaret Fitzgerald was the daughter of a cosmopolitan pair, who after many shifts for a living,

The Marriage of William Ashe

had settled in Paris, where the father acted as correspondent for various English papers. Her beauty, her caprices, and her "affairs" were all well known in Paris. As to what the relations between her and Lord Blackwater might have been before the death of the wife, Lord Grosville took a frankly uncharitable view. But when that event occurred, Blackwater was beginning to get old, and Miss Fitzgerald had become necessary to him. She pressed all her advantages, and it ended in his marrying her. The new Lady Blackwater presented him with one child, a daughter; and about two years after its birth he sent for his elder daughter, Lady Alice, to join them in the sumptuous apartment in the Place Vendôme which he had furnished for his new wife, in defiance both of his English and Irish creditors.

Lady Alice arrived—a fair slip of a girl, possessed, it was plain to see, by a nervous terror both of her father and step-mother. But Lady Blackwater received her with effusion, caressed her in public, dressed her to perfection, and made all possible use of the girl's presence in the house for the advancement of her own social position. Within a year the Belfast trustees, watching uneasily from a distance, received a letter from Lord Blackwater, announcing Lady Alice's runaway marriage with a certain Colonel Wensleydale, formerly of the Grenadier Guards. Lord Blackwater professed himself vastly annoyed and displeased. The young people, furiously in love, had managed the affair, however, with a skill that baffled all vigilance. Married they were, and without any settlements, Colonel Wensleydale having nothing to settle, and Lady Alice, like a little fool, being only anxious to pour all that she possessed into the lap of her

The Marriage of William Ashe

beloved. The father threw himself on the mercy of the trustees, reminding them that in little more than three years Lady Alice would become unfettered mistress of her own fortune, and begging them meanwhile to make proper provision for the rash but happy pair. Harry Wensleydale, after all, was a rattling good fellow, with whom all the young women were in love. The thing, though naughty, was natural; and the colonel would make an excellent husband.

One Presbyterian trustee left his business in Belfast and ventured himself among the abominations of Paris. He was much befooled and befeasted. He found a shy young wife tremulously in love; a handsome husband; an amiable step-mother. He knew no one in Paris who could enlighten him, and was not clever enough to invent means of getting information for himself. He was induced to promise a sufficient income for the moment on behalf of himself and his co-trustee; and for the rest was obliged to be content with vague assurances from Colonel Wensleydale that as soon as his wife came into her property fitting settlements should be made.

Four years passed by. The young people lived with the Blackwaters, and their income kept the establishment going. Lady Alice had a child, and was at first not altogether unhappy. She was little more than a timid child herself; and no doubt, to begin with, she was in love. Then came her majority. In defiance of all her trustees, she gave her whole fortune to her husband, and no power could prevent her from so doing.

The Blackwater ménage blazed up into a sudden splendor. Lady Blackwater's carriage and Lady Blackwater's jewels had never been finer; and amid the crowds

The Marriage of William Ashe

who frequented the house, the slight figure, the fallow face, and absent eyes of her step-daughter attracted little remark. Lady Alice Wensleydale was said to be delicate and reserved; she made no friends, explained herself to no one; and it was supposed that she occupied herself with her little boy.

Then one December she disappeared from the apartment in the Place Vendôme. It was said that she and the boy found the climate of Paris too cold in winter, and had gone for a time to Italy. Colonel Wensleydale continued to live with the Blackwaters, and their apartment was no less sumptuous, their dinners no less talked of, their extravagance no less noisy than before. But Lady Alice did not come back with the spring; and some ugly rumors began to creep about. They were checked, however, by the death of Lord Blackwater, which occurred within a year of his daughter's departure; by the monstrous debts he left behind him; and by the sale of the contents of the famous apartment, matters, all of them, sufficiently ugly or scandalous in themselves to keep the tongues of fame busy. Lady Blackwater left Paris, and when she reappeared, it was in Rome as the Comtesse d'Estrées, the wife of yet another old man, whose health obliged them to winter in the south and to spend the summer in yachting. Her *salon* in Rome under Pio Nono became a great rendezvous for English and Americans, attracted by the historic names and titles that M. d'Estrées' connections among the Black nobility, his wealth, and his interest in several of the Catholic banking-houses of Rome and Naples enabled his wife to command.

Colonel Wensleydale did not appear. Madame d'Es-

The Marriage of William Ashe

trées let it be understood that her step-daughter was of a difficult temper, and now spent most of her time in Ireland. Her own daughter, her "darling Kitty," was being educated in Paris by the Sœurs Blanches, and she pined for the day when the "little sweet" should join her, ready to spread her wings in the great world. But mothers must not be impatient, Kitty must have all the advantages that befitted her rank; and to what better hands could the most anxious mother intrust her than to those charming, aristocratic, accomplished nuns of the Sœurs Blanches?

Then one January day M. d'Estrées drove out to San Paolo fuori le Mura, and caught a blast from the snowy Sabines coming back. In three days he was dead, and his well-provided widow had snatched the bulk of his fortune from the hands of his needy and embittered kindred.

Within six months of his death she had bought a house in St. James's Place, and her London career had begun.

"It is here that we come in," said Lord Grosville, when, with more digressions and more plainness of speech with regard to his quondam sister-in-law than can be here reproduced, he had brought his story to this point. "Blackwater—the old ruffian—when he was dying had a moment of remorse. He wrote to my wife and asked her to look after his girls, 'For God's sake, Lina, see if you can help Alice—Wensleydale's a perfect brute.' That was the first light we had on the situation, for Adelina had long before washed her hands of him; and we knew that *she* hated us. Well, we tried; of course we tried.

The Marriage of William Ashe

But so long as her husband lived Alice would have nothing to say to any of us. I suppose she thought that for her boy's sake she'd better keep a bad business to herself as much as possible—"

"Wensleydale—Wensleydale?" said Ashe, who had been smoking hard and silently beside his host. "You mean the man who distinguished himself in the Crimea? He died last year—at Naples, wasn't it?"

Lord Grosville assented.

It appeared that during the last year of his life Lady Alice had nursed her husband faithfully through disease and poverty; for scarcely a vestige of her fortune remained, and an application for money made by Wensleydale to Madame d'Estrées, unknown to his wife, had been peremptorily refused. The colonel died, and within three months of his death Lady Alice had also lost her son and only child, of blood-poisoning developed in Naples, whither he had been summoned from school that his father might see him for the last time.

Then, after seventeen years, Lady Alice came back to her kindred, who had last seen her as a young girl—gentle, undeveloped, easily led, and rather stupid. She returned a gray-haired woman of thirty-four, who had lost youth, fortune, child, and husband; whose aspect, moreover, suggested losses still deeper and more drear. At first she wrapped herself in what seemed to some a dull and to others a tragic silence. But suddenly a flame leaped up in her. She became aware of the position of Madame d'Estrées in London; and one day, at a private view of the Academy, her former step-mother went up to her smiling, with out-stretched hand. Lady Alice turned very pale; the hand dropped, and Alice Wensley-

The Marriage of William Ashe

dale walked rapidly away. But that night, in the Grosville house, she spoke out.

"She told Lina and myself the whole story. You'd have thought the woman was possessed. My wife—she's not of the crying sort, nor am I. But she cried, and I believe—well, I can tell you it was enough to move a stone. And when she'd done, she just went away, and locked her door, and let no one say a word to her. She has told one or two other relations and friends, and—"

"And the relations and friends have told others?"

"Well, I can answer for myself," said Grosville after a pause. "This happened three months ago. I never have told, and never shall tell, all the details as she told them to us. But we have let enough be known—"

"Enough?—enough to damn Madame d'Estrées?"

"Oh, well, as far as the women were concerned, she was mostly that already. There are other tales going about. I expect you know them."

"No, I don't know them," said Ashe.

Lord Grosville's face expressed surprise. "Well, this finished it," he said.

"Poor child!" said Ashe, slowly, putting down his cigarette and turning a thoughtful look on the carpet.

"Alice?" said Lord Grosville.

"No."

"Oh! you mean Kitty? Yes, I had forgotten her for the moment. Yes, poor child."

There was silence a moment, then Lord Grosville inquired:

"What do you think of her?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"I?" said Ashe, with a laugh. "I don't know. She's obviously very pretty—"

"And a handful!" said Lord Grosville.

"Oh, quite plainly a handful," said Ashe, rather absently. Then the memory of Kitty's entry recurred to them both, and they laughed.

"Not much shyness left in that young woman—eh?" said the old man. "She tells my girls such stories of her French doings—my wife's had to stop it. She seems to have had all sorts of love-affairs already. And, of course, she'll have any number over here—sure to. Some unscrupulous fellow 'll get hold of her, for naturally the right sort won't marry her. I don't know what we can do. Adelina offered to take her altogether. But that woman wouldn't hear of it. She wrote Lina rather a good letter—on her dignity—and that kind of thing. We gave her an opening, and, by Jove! she took it."

"And meanwhile Lady Kitty has no dealings with her step-sister?"

"You heard what she said. Extraordinary girl! to let the thing out plump like that. Just like the blood. They say anything that comes into their heads. If we had known that Alice was to be with the Sowerbys this week-end, my wife would certainly have put Kitty off. It would be uncommonly awkward if they were to meet—here for instance. Hullo! Is it getting late?"

For the whist-players at the end of the library had pushed back their chairs, and men were strolling back from the billiard-room.

"I am afraid Lady Kitty understands there is something wrong with her mother's position," said Ashe, as they rose.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"I dare say. Brought up in Paris, you see," said the white-haired Englishman, with a shrug. "Of course, she knows everything she shouldn't."

"Brought up in a convent, please," said Ashe, smiling. "And I thought the French *girl* was the most innocent and ignorant thing alive."

Lord Grosville received the remark with derision.

"You ask my wife what she thinks about French convents. She knows—she's had lots of Catholic relations. She'll tell you tales."

Ashe thought, however, that he could trust himself to see that she did nothing of the sort.

The smoking-room broke up late, but the new Under-Secretary sat up still later, reading and smoking in his bedroom. A box of Foreign Office papers lay on his table. He went through them with a keen sense of pleasure, enjoying his new work and his own competence to do it, of which, notwithstanding his remarks to Mary Lyster, he was not really at all in doubt. Then when his comments were done, and the papers replaced in the order in which they would now go up to the Secretary of State, he felt the spring night oppressively mild, and walking to the window, he threw it wide open.

He looked out upon a Dutch garden, full of spring flowers in bloom. In the midst was a small fountain, which murmured to itself through the night. An orangery or conservatory, of a charming eighteenth-century design, ran round the garden in a semicircle, its flat pilasters and mouldings of yellow stone taking under the moonlight the color and the delicacy of ivory.

The Marriage of William Ashe

Beyond the terrace which bordered the garden, the ground fell to a river, of which the reaches, now dazzling, now sombre, now slipping secret under woods, and now silverly open to the gentle slopes of the park, brought wildness and romance into a scene that had else been tame. Beyond the river on a rising ground was a village church with a spire. The formal garden, the Georgian conservatory, the park, the river, the church—they breathed England and the traditional English life. All that they implied, of custom and inheritance, of strength and narrowness, of cramping prejudice and stubborn force, was very familiar to Ashe, and on the whole very congenial. He was glad to be an Englishman and a member of an English government. The ironic mood which was tolerably constant in him did not in the least interfere with his normal enjoyment of normal goods. He saw himself often as a shade among shadows, as an actor among actors; but the play was good all the same. That a man should know himself to be a fool was in his eyes, as it was in Lord Melbourne's, the first of necessities. But fool or no fool, let him find the occupations that suited him, and pursue them. On those terms life was still amply worth living, and ginger was still hot in the mouth.

This was his usual philosophy. Religiously he was a sceptic, enormously interested in religion. Should he ever become Prime Minister, as Lady Tranmore prophesied, he would know much more theology than the bishops he might be called on to appoint. Politically, at the same time, he was an aristocrat, enormously interested in liberty. The absurdities of his own class were still more plain to him perhaps than the absurdities of

The Marriage of William Ashe

the populace. But had he lived a couple of generations earlier he would have gone with passion for Catholic emancipation, and boggled at the Reform Bill. And if fate had thrown him on earlier days still, he would not, like Falkland, have died ingeminating peace; he would have fought; but on which side, no friend of his—up till now—could have been quite sure. To have the reputation of an idler, and to be in truth a plodding and unwearied student; this, at any rate, pleased him. To avow an enthusiasm, or an affection, generally seemed to him an indelicacy; only two or three people in the world knew what was the real quality of his heart. Yet no man feigns shirking without in some measure learning to shirk; and there were certain true indolences and sybaritisms in Ashe of which he was fully and contemptuously aware, without either wishing or feeling himself able to break the yoke of them.

At the present moment, however, he was rather conscious of much unusual stirring and exaltation of personality. As he stood looking out into the English night the currents of his blood ran free and fast. Never had he felt the natural appetite for living so strong in him, combined with what seemed to be at once a divination of coming change, and a thirst for it. Was it the mere advancement of his fortunes—or something infinitely subtler and sweeter? It was as though waves of softness and of yearning welled up from some unknown source, seeking an object and an outlet.

As he stood there dreaming, he suddenly became conscious of sounds in the room overhead. Or rather in the now absolute stillness of the rest of the house he realized that the movements and voices above him, which



"HE STOOD LOOKING OUT INTO THE NIGHT"



The Marriage of William Ashe

had really been going on since he entered his room, persisted when everything else had died away.

Two people were talking; or rather one voice ran on perpetually, broken at intervals by the other. He began to suspect to whom the voice belonged; and as he did so, the window above his own was thrown open. He stepped back involuntarily, but not before he had caught a few words in French, spoken apparently by Lady Kitty.

"Ciel! what a night!—and how the flowers smell! And the stars—I adore the stars! Mademoiselle—come here! Mademoiselle! answer me—I won't tell tales—now do you—*really and truly*—believe in God?"

A laugh, which was a laugh of pleasure, ran through Ashe, as he hurriedly put out his lights.

"Tormentor!" he said to himself—"must you put a woman through her theological paces at this time of night? Can't you go to sleep, you little whirlwind?—What's to be done? If I shut my window the noise will scare her. But I can't stand eavesdropping here."

He withdrew softly from the window and began to undress. But Lady Kitty was leaning out, and her voice carried amazingly. Heard in this way also, apart from form and face, it became a separate living thing. Ashe stood arrested, his watch that he was winding up in his hand. He had known the voice till now as something sharp and light, the sign surely of a chatterer and a flirt. To-night, as Kitty made use of it to expound her own peculiar theology to the French governess—whereof a few fragments now and then floated down to Ashe—nothing could have been more musical, melancholy, caressing. A voice full of sex, and the spell of sex.

The Marriage of William Ashe

What had she been talking of all these hours to mademoiselle? A lady whom she could never have set eyes on before this visit. He thought of her face, in the drawing-room, as she had spoken of her sister—of her eyes, so full of a bright feverish pain, which had hung upon his own.

Had she, indeed, been confiding all her home secrets to this stranger? Ashe felt a movement of distaste, almost of disgust. Yet he remembered that it was by her unconventionality, her lack of all proper reticence, or, as many would have said, all delicate feeling, that she had made her first impression upon him. Ay, that had been an impression—an impression indeed! He realized the fact profoundly, as he stood lingering in the darkness, trying not to hear the voice that thrilled him.

At last!—was she going to bed?

"Ah!—but I am a pig, to keep you up like this! *Allez dormir!*" (The sound of a kiss.) "I? Oh no! Why should one go to bed? It is in the night one begins to live."

She fell to humming a little French tune, then broke off.

"You remember? You promise? You have the letter?"

Asseverations apparently from mademoiselle, and a mention of eight o'clock, followed by remorse from Kitty.

"Eight o'clock! And I keep you like this. I am a brute beast! *Allez—allez vite!*" And quick steps scudded across the floor above, followed by the shutting of a door.

Kitty, however, came back to the window, and Ashe could still hear her sighing and talking to herself.

The Marriage of William Ashe

What had she been plotting? A letter? Conveyed by mademoiselle? To whom?

Long after all sounds above had ceased Ashe still lay awake, thinking of the story he had heard from Lord Grosville. Certainly, if he had known it, he would never have gone familiarly to Madame d'Estrées' house. Laxity, for a man of his type, is one thing; lying, meanness, and cruelty are another. What could be done for this poor child in her strange and sinister position? He was ironically conscious of a sudden heat of missionary zeal. For if the creature to be saved had not possessed such a pair of eyes—so slim a neck—such a haunting and teasing personality—what then?

The question presently plunged with him into sleep. But he had not forgotten it when he awoke.

He had just finished dressing next morning, when he chanced to see from the front window of his room, which commanded the main stretch of the park, the figure of a lady on one of the paths. She seemed to be returning from the farther end of a long avenue, and was evidently hurrying to reach the house. As she approached, however, she turned aside into a shrubby walk and was soon lost to view. But Ashe had recognized Mademoiselle D. The matter of the letter recurred to him. He guessed that she had already delivered it. But where?

At breakfast Lady Kitty did not appear. Ashe made inquiries of the younger Miss Grosville, who replied with some tartness that she supposed Kitty had a cold, and hurried off herself to dress for Sunday-school. It was not at all the custom for young ladies to breakfast in bed

The Marriage of William Ashe

on Sundays at Grosville Park, and Lady Grosville's brow was clouded. Ashe felt it a positive effort to tell her that he was not going to church, and when she had marshalled her flock and carried them off, those left behind knew themselves, indeed, as heathens and publicans.

Ashe wandered out with some official papers and a pipe into the spring sunshine. Mr. Kershaw, the editor, would gladly have caught him for a political talk. But Ashe would not be caught. As to the interests of England in the Persian Gulf, both they and Mr. Kershaw might for the moment go hang. Would Lady Kitty meet him in the old garden at eleven-thirty, or would she not? That was the only thing that mattered.

However, it was still more than an hour to the time mentioned. Ashe spent a while in roaming a wood delicately pied with primroses and anemones, and then sauntered back into the gardens, which were old and famous.

Suddenly, as he came upon a terrace bordered by a thick yew hedge, and descending by steps to a lower terrace, he became aware of voices in a strange tone and key—not loud, but, as it were, intensified far beyond the note of ordinary talk. Ashe stood still; for he had recognized the voice of Lady Kitty. But before he had made up his mind what to do a lady began to ascend the steps which connected the upper terrace with the lower. She came straight towards him, and Ashe looked at her with astonishment. She was not a member of the Grosville house party, and Ashe had never seen her before. Yet in her pale, unhappy face there was something that recalled another person; something, too, in

The Marriage of William Ashe

her gait and her passionate energy of movement. She swept past him, and he saw that she was tall and thin, and dressed in deep mourning. Her eyes were set on some inner vision; he felt that she scarcely saw him. She passed like an embodied grief—menacing and lamentable.

Something like a cry pursued her up the steps. But she did not turn. She walked swiftly on, and was soon lost to sight in the trees.

Ashe hesitated a moment, then hurried down the steps.

On a stone seat beneath the yew hedge, Kitty Bristol lay prone. He heard her sobs, and they went most strangely through his heart.

"Lady Kitty!" he said, as he stood beside her and bent over her.

She looked up, and showed no surprise. Her face was bathed in tears, but her hand sought his piteously and drew him towards her.

"I have seen my sister," she said, "and she hates me. What have I done? I think I shall die of despair!"

V

THE effect of the few sobbing words, with which Kitty Bristol had greeted his presence beside her, upon the feeling of William Ashe was both sharp and deep, for they seemed already to imply a peculiar relation, a special link between them. Had it not, indeed, begun in that very moment at St. James's Place when he had first caught sight of her, sitting forlorn in her white dress?—when she had “willed” him to come to her, and he came? Surely—though as to this he had his qualms—she could not have spoken with this abandonment to any other of her new English acquaintances? To Darrell, for instance, who was expected at Grosville Park that evening. No! From the beginning she had turned to him, William Ashe; she had been conscious of the same mutual understanding, the same sympathy in difference that he himself felt.

It was, at any rate, with the feeling of one whose fate has most strangely, most unexpectedly overtaken him that he sat down beside her. His own pulses were running at a great rate; but there was to be no sign of it for her. He tried, indeed, to calm her by that mere cheerful strength and vitality of which he was so easily master. “Why should you be in despair?” he said, bending towards her. “Tell me. Let me try and help you. Was your sister unkind to you?”

The Marriage of William Ashe

Kitty made no reply at once. The tears that brimmed her large eyes slipped down her cheeks without disfiguring her. She was looking absently, intently, into a dark depth of wood as though she sought there for some truth that escaped her—truth of the past or of the present.

"I don't know," she said, at last, shaking her head, "I don't know whether it was unkind. Perhaps it was only what we deserve, maman and I."

"You!" cried Ashe.

"Yes," she said, passionately. "Who's going to separate between maman and me? If she's done mean, shocking things, the people she's done them to will hate me too. They *shall* hate me! It's right."

She turned to him violently. She was very white, and her little hands as she sat there before him, proudly erect, twisted a lace handkerchief between them that would soon be in tatters. Somehow Ashe winced before the wreck of the handkerchief; what need to ruin the pretty, fragile thing?

"I am quite sure no one will ever hate you for what you haven't done," he said, steadily. "That would be abominably unfair. But, you see, I don't understand—and I don't like—I don't wish—to ask questions."

"*Do ask questions!*" she cried, looking at him almost reproachfully. "That's just what I want you to do—Only," she added, hanging her head in depression, "I shouldn't know what to answer. I am played with, and treated as a baby! There is something horrible the matter—and no one trusts me—every one keeps me in the dark. No one ever thinks whether I am miserable or not."

The Marriage of William Ashe

She raised her hands to her eyes and vehemently wiped away her tears with the tattered lace handkerchief. In all these words and actions, however, she was graceful and touching, because she was natural. She was not posing or conscious, she was hiding nothing. Yet Ashe felt certain she could act a part magnificently; only it would not be for the lie's sake, but for the sake of some romantic impulse or imagination.

"Why should you torment yourself so?" he asked her, kindly. Her hand had dropped and lay beside her on the bench. To his own amazement he found himself clasping it. "Isn't it better to forget old griefs? You can't help what happened years ago—you can't undo it. You've got to live your own life—*happily*! And I just wish you'd set about it."

He smiled at her, and there were few faces more attractive than his when he let his natural softness have its way, without irony. She let her eyes be drawn to his, and as they met he saw a flush rise in her clear skin and spread to the pale gold of her hair. The man in him was marvellously pleased by that flush—fascinated, indeed. But she gave him small time to observe it; she drew herself impatiently away.

"Of course, you don't understand a word about it," she said, "or you couldn't talk like that. But I'll tell you." Her eyes, half miserable, half audacious, returned to him. "My sister—came here—because I sent for her. I made mademoiselle go with a letter. Of course, I knew there was a mystery—I knew the Gros-villes did not want us to meet—I knew that she and maman hated each other. But maman will tell me nothing—and I have a *right* to know."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"No, you have no right to know," said Ashe, gravely. She looked at him wildly.

"I have—I have!" she repeated, passionately. "Well, I told my sister to meet me here—I had forgotten, you see, all about you! My mind was so full of Alice. And when she came I felt as if it was a dream—a horrible, tragic dream. You know—she is *so* like me—which means, I suppose, that we are both like papa. Only her face—it's not handsome, oh no—but it's stern—and—yes, noble! I was proud of her. I would like to have gone on my knee and kissed her dress. But she would not take my hand—she would hardly speak to me. She said she had come, because it was best, now that I was in England, that we should meet once, and understand that we *couldn't* meet—that we could never, never be friends. She said that she hated my mother—that for years she had kept silence, but that now she meant to punish maman—to drive her from London. And then"—the girl's lips trembled under the memory—"she came close to me, and she looked into my eyes, and she said, 'Yes, we're like each other—we're like our father—and it would be better for us both if we had never been born—'"

"Ah, cruel!" cried Ashe, involuntarily, and once more his hand found Kitty's small fingers and pressed them in his.

Kitty looked at him with a strange, exalted look.

"No. I think it's true. I often think I'm not made to be happy. I can't ever be happy—it's not in me."

"It's in you to say foolish things then!" said Ashe, lightly, and crossing his arms he tried to assume the practical elder-brotherly air, which he felt befitted the

The Marriage of William Ashe

situation—if anything befitted it. For in truth it seemed to him one singularly confused and ugly. Their talk floated above tragic depths, guessed at by him, wholly unknown to her. And yet her youth shrank from it knew not what—"as an animal shrinks from shadows in the twilight." She seemed to him to sit enwrapped in a vague cloud of shame, resenting and hating it, yet not able to escape from thinking and talking of it. But she must not talk of it.

She did not answer his last remark for a little while. She sat looking before her, overwhelmed, it seemed, by an inward rush of images and sensations. Till, with a sudden movement, she turned to him and said, smiling, quite in her ordinary voice:

"Do you know why I shall never be happy? It is because I have such a bad temper."

"Have you?" said Ashe, smiling.

She gave him a curious look.

"You don't believe it? If you had been in the convent, you would have believed it. I'm mad sometimes—quite mad; with pride, I suppose, and vanity. The Sœurs said it was that."

"They had to explain it somehow," said Ashe. "But I am quite sure that if I lived in a convent I should have a furious temper."

"You!" she said, half contemptuously. "You couldn't be ill-tempered anywhere. That's the one thing I don't like about you—you're too calm—too—too satisfied. It's— Well! you said a sharp thing to me, so I don't see why I shouldn't say one to you. You shouldn't look as though you enjoyed your life so much. It's *bourgeois*! It is, indeed." And she frowned

The Marriage of William Ashe

upon him with a little extravagant air that amused him.

By some prescience, she had put on that morning a black dress of thin material, made with extreme simplicity. No flounces, no fanfaronnade. A little girlish dress, that made the girlish figure seem even frailer and lighter than he remembered it the night before in the splendors of her Paris gown. Her large black hat emphasized the whiteness of her brow, the brilliance of her most beautiful eyes; and then all the rest was insubstantial sprite and airy nothing, to be crushed in one hand. And yet what untamed, indomitable things breathed from it—a self surely more self, more intensely, obstinately alive than any he had yet known.

Her attack had brought the involuntary blood to his cheeks, which annoyed him. But he invited her to say why cheerfulness was a vice. She replied that no one should look success—as much as he did.

“And you scorn success?”

“Scorn it!” She drew a long breath, clasped both her hands above her head, then slowly let the thin arms fall again. “Scorn it! What nonsense! But everybody who hasn’t got it hates those who have.”

“Don’t hate me!” said Ashe, quickly.

“Yes,” she said, with stubbornness, “I must. Do you know why I was such a wild-cat at school? Because some of the other girls were more important than I—much more important—and richer—and more beautiful—and people paid them more attention. And that seemed to *burn* the heart in me.” She pressed her hands to her breast with a passionate gesture. “You know the French word *panache*? Well, that’s what I care for

The Marriage of William Ashe

—that's what I *adore!* To be the first—the best—the most distinguished. To be envied—and pointed at—obeyed when I lift my finger—and then to come to some great, glorious, tragic end!”

Ashe moved impatiently.

“Lady Kitty, I don't like to hear you talk like this. It's wild, and it's also—I beg your pardon—”

“In bad taste?” she said, catching him up breathlessly. “That's what you meant, isn't it? You said it to me before, when I called you handsome.”

“Pshaw!” he said, in vexation. She watched him throw himself back and feel for his cigarette-case; a gesture of her hand gave him leave; she waited, smiling, till he had taken a few calming whiffs. Then she gently moved towards him.

“Don't be angry with me!” she said, in a sweet, low voice. “Don't you understand how hard it is—to have that nature—and then to come here out of the convent—where one had lived on dreams—and find one's self—”

She turned her head away. Ashe put down his new-lit cigarette.

“Find yourself?” he repeated.

“Everybody scorns me!” she said, her brow drooping. Ashe exclaimed.

“You know it's true. My mother is not received. Can you deny that?”

“She has many friends,” said Ashe.

“She is *not received*. When I speak of her no one answers me. Lady Grosville asked me here—*me*—out of charity. It would be thought a disgrace to marry me—”

“Look here, Lady Kitty!—”

The Marriage of William Ashe

"And I"—she wrung her small hands, as though she clasped the necks of her enemies—"I would never *look* at a man who did not think it the glory of his life to win me. So you see, I shall never marry. But then the dreadful thing is—"

She let him see a white, stormy face.

"That I have no loyalty to *maman*—I—I don't think I even love her."

Ashe surveyed her gravely.

"You don't mean that," he said.

"I think I do," she persisted. "I had a horrid childhood. I won't tell tales; but, you see, I don't *know* *maman*. I know the *Sœurs* much better. And then for some one you don't know—to have to—to have to bear—this horrible thing—"

She buried her face in her hands. Ashe looked at her in perplexity.

"You sha'n't bear anything horrible," he said, with energy. "There are plenty of people who will take care of that. Do you mind telling me—have there been special difficulties just lately?"

"Oh yes," she said, calmly, looking up, "awful! *Maman's* debts are—well—ridiculous. For that alone I don't think she'll be able to stay in London—apart from—Alice."

The name recalled all she had just passed through, and her face quivered. "What will she do?" she said, under her breath. "How will she punish us?—and why?—for what?"

Her dread, her ignorance, her fierce, bruised vanity, her struggling pride, her helplessness, appealed amazingly to the man beside her. He began to talk to her

The Marriage of William Ashe

very gently and wisely, begging her to let the past alone, to think only what could be done to help the present. In the first place, would she not let his mother be of use to her?

He could answer for Lady Tranmore. Why shouldn't Lady Kitty spend the summer with her in Scotland? No doubt Madame d'Estrées would be abroad.

"Then I must go with her," said Kitty.

Ashe hesitated.

"Of course, if she wishes it."

"But I don't know that she will wish it. She is not very fond of me," said Kitty, doubtfully. "Yes, I would like to stay with Lady Tranmore. But will your cousin be there?"

"Miss Lyster?"

Kitty nodded.

"How can I tell? Of course, she is often there."

"It is quite curious," said Kitty, after reflection, "how we dislike each other. And it is so odd. You know most people like me!"

She looked up at him without a trace of coquetry, rather with a certain timidity that feared possible rebuff. "That's always been my difficulty," she went on, "till now. Everybody spoils me. I always get my own way. In the convent I was indulged and flattered, and then they wondered that I made all sorts of follies. I want a guide—that's quite certain—somebody to tell me what to do."

"I would offer myself for the post," said Ashe, "but that I feel perfectly sure that you would never follow anybody's advice in anything."

"Yes, I would," she said, wistfully. "I would—"

The Marriage of William Ashe

Ashe's face changed.

"Ah, if you would—"

She sprang up. "Do you see"—she pointed to some figures on a distant path—"they are coming back from church. You understand?—*nobody* must know about my sister. It will come round to Aunt Lina, of course; but I hope it 'll be when I'm gone. If she knew now, I should go back to London to-day."

Ashe made it clear to her that he would be discretion itself. They left the bench, but, as they began to ascend the steps, Kitty turned back.

"I wish I hadn't seen her," she said, in a miserable tone, the tears flooding once more into her eyes.

Ashe looked at her with great kindness, but without speaking. The moment of sharp pain passed, and she moved on languidly beside him. But there was an infection in his strong, handsome presence, and her smiles soon came back. By the time they neared the house, indeed, she seemed to be in wild spirits again.

Did he know, she asked him, that three more guests were coming that afternoon—Mr. Darrell, Mr. Louis Harman, *and*—Mr. Geoffrey Cliffe? She laid an emphasis on the last name, which made Ashe say, carelessly:

"You want to meet him so much?"

"Of course. Doesn't all the world?"

Ashe replied that he could only answer for himself, and as far as he was concerned he could do very well without Cliffe's company at all times.

Whereupon Kitty protested with fire that other men were jealous of such a famous person because women liked him—because—

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Because the man's a coxcomb and the women spoil him?"

"A coxcomb!"

Kitty was up in arms.

"Pray, is he not a great traveller?—a *very* great traveller?" she asked, with indignation.

"Certainly, by his own account."

"And a most brilliant writer?"

"Macaulayese," said Ashe, perversely, "and not very good at that."

Kitty was at first struck dumb, and then began a voluble protest against unfairness so monstrous. Did not all intelligent people read and admire? It was mere jealousy, she repeated, to deny the gentleman's claims.

Ashe let her talk and quote and excite herself, applying every now and then a little sly touch of the goad, to make her still run on, and so forget the tragic hour which had overshadowed her. And meanwhile all he cared for was to watch the flashing of her face and eyes, and the play of the wind in her hair, and the springing grace with which she moved. Poor child!—it all came back to that—poor child!—what was to be done with her?

At luncheon—the Sunday luncheon—which still, at Grosville Park, as in the early Victorian days of Lord Grosville's mother, consisted of a huge baronial sirloin to which all else upon the varied table appeared as appurtenance and appendage, Ashe allowed himself the inward reflection that the Grosville Park Sundays were degenerating. Both Lord and Lady Grosville had been good hosts in their day; and the downrightness of the

The Marriage of William Ashe

wife had been as much to the taste of many as the agreeable gossip of the husband. But on this occasion both were silent and absent-minded. Lady Grosville showed no generalship in placing her guests; the wrong people sat next to each other, and the whole party dragged—without a leader.

And certainly Kitty Bristol did nothing to enliven it. She sat very silent, her black dress changing her a good deal, to Ashe's thinking, bringing back, as he chose to fancy, the pale convent girl. Was it so that she went through her pious exercises?—by-the-way, she was, of course, a Catholic?—said her lessons, and went to her confessor? Had the French cousin with whom she rode stag-hunting ever seen her like this? No; Ashe felt certain that "Henri" had never seen her, except as a fashion-plate, or *en amazone*. He could have made nothing of this ghost in black—this distinguished, piteous, little ghost.

After luncheon it became tolerably clear to Ashe that Lady Grosville's preoccupation had a cause. And presently catching him alone in the library, whither he had retired with some official papers, she closed the door with deliberate care, and stood before him.

"I see you are interested in Kitty, and I feel as if I must tell you, and ask your opinion. William, do you know what that child has been doing?"

He looked up from his writing.

"Ah!—what have you been discovering?"

"Grosville told you the story last night."

Ashe nodded.

"Well—Kitty wrote to Alice this morning—and they met. Alice has kept her room since—prostrate—so the

The Marriage of William Ashe

Sowerbys tell me. I have just had a note from Mrs. Sowerby. Wasn't it an extraordinary, an indelicate thing to do?"

Ashe studied the frowning lady a moment—so large and daunting in her black silk and white lace. She seemed to suggest all those aspects of the English Sunday for which he had most secret dislike—its Pharisaism and dulness and heavy meals. He felt himself through and through Lady Kitty's champion.

"I should have thought it very natural," was his reply.

Lady Grosville threw up her hands.

"Natural!—when she knows—"

"How can she know?" cried Ashe, hotly. "How can such a child know or guess anything? She only knows that there is some black charge against her mother, on which no one will enlighten her. How can they? But meanwhile her mother is ostracized, and she feels herself dragged into the disgrace, not understanding why or wherefore. Could anything be more pathetic—more touching?"

In his heat of feeling he got up, and began to pace up and down. Lady Grosville's countenance expressed first astonishment—then wavering.

"Oh—of course, it's very sad," she said—"extremely sad. But I should have thought Kitty was clever enough to understand at least that Alice must have some grave reason for breaking with her mother—"

"Don't you all forget what a child she is," said Ashe, indignantly—"not yet nineteen!"

"Yes, that's true," said Lady Grosville, grudgingly. "I must confess I find it difficult to judge her fairly. She's so different from my own girls."

The Marriage of William Ashe

Ashe hastily agreed. Then it struck him as odd that he should have fallen so quickly into this position of Kitty's defender with her father's family; and he drew in his horns. He resumed his work, and Lady Grosville sat for a while, her hands in her lap, quietly observing him.

At last she said:

"So you think, William, I had better leave Kitty alone?"

"About what?" Ashe raised his curly head with a laugh. "Don't put too much responsibility on me. I know nothing about young ladies."

"I don't know that I do—much," said Lady Grosville, candidly. "My own daughters are so exceptional."

Ashe held his peace. Distant cousins as they were, he hardly knew the Grosville girls apart, and had never yet grasped any reason why he should.

"At any rate, I see clearly," said Lady Grosville, after another pause, "that you're very sorry for Kitty. Of course, it's very nice of you, and I find it's what most people feel."

"Hang it! dear Lady Grosville, why shouldn't they?" said Ashe, turning round on his chair. "If ever there was a forlorn little person on earth, I thought Lady Kitty was that person at lunch to-day."

"And after that absurd exhibition last night!" said Lady Grosville, with a shrug. "You never know where to have her. You think she looked ill?"

"I am sure she has got a splitting headache," said Ashe, boldly. "And why you and Grosville shouldn't be as sorry for her as for Lady Alice I can't imagine. She's done nothing."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"No, that's true," said Lady Grosville, as she rose. Then she added: "I'll go and see if she has a headache. You must consult with us, William; you know the mother so well."

"Oh, I'm no good!" said Ashe, with energy. "But I'm sure that kindness would pay with Lady Kitty."

He smiled at her, wishing to Heaven she would go.

Lady Grosville stared.

"I hope we are always kind to her," she said, with a touch of haughtiness. And then the library door closed behind her.

"Kindness" was indeed, that afternoon, the order of the day, as from the Grosvilles to Lady Kitty. Ashe wondered how she liked it. The girls followed her about with shawls. Lady Grosville installed her on a sofa in the back drawing-room. A bottle of sal-volatile appeared, and Caroline Grosville, instead of going twice to Sunday-school, devoted herself to fanning Kitty, though the weather—which was sunny, with a sharp east wind—suggested, to Ashe's thinking, fires rather than fans.

He was himself carried off for the customary Sunday walk, Mr. Kershaw being now determined to claim the sacred rights of the press. The walkers left the house by a garden door, to reach which they had to pass through the farther drawing-room. Kitty, a picturesque figure on the sofa, nodded farewell to Ashe, and then, unseen by Caroline Grosville, who sat behind her, shot him a last look which drove him to a precipitate exit lest the inward laugh should out.

The walk through the flat Cambridgeshire country was

The Marriage of William Ashe

long and strenuous. Though for at least half of it the active journalist who was Ashe's companion conceived the poorest opinion of the new minister. Ashe knew nothing; had no opinions; cared for nothing, except now and then for the stalking of an unfamiliar bird, or the antics of the dogs, or tales of horse-racing, of which he talked with a fervor entirely denied to those high political topics of which Kershaw's ardent soul was full.

Again and again did the journalist put them under his nose in their most attractive guise. In vain; Ashe would have none of them. Till suddenly a chance word started an Indian frontier question, vastly important, and totally unknown to the English public. Ashe casually began to talk; the trickle became a stream, and presently he was holding forth with an impetuosity, a knowledge, a matured and careful judgment that fairly amazed the man beside him.

The long road, bordered by the flat fen meadows, the wide silver sky, the gently lengthening day, all passed unnoticed. The journalist found himself in the grip of a *mind*—strong, active, rich. He gave himself up with docility, yet with a growing astonishment, and when they stood once more on the steps of the house he said to his companion:

"You must have followed these matters for years. Why have you never spoken in the House, or written anything?"

Ashe's aspect changed at once.

"What would have been the good?" he said, with his easy smile. "The fellows who didn't know wouldn't have believed me; and the fellows who knew didn't want telling."

The Marriage of William Ashe

A shade of impatience showed in Kershaw's aspect.

"I thought," he said, "ours was government by discussion."

Ashe laughed, and, turning on the steps, he pointed to the splendid gardens and finely wooded park.

"Or government by country-houses—which? If you support us in this—as I gather you will—this walk will have been worth a debate—now won't it?"

The flattered journalist smiled, and they entered the house. From the inner hall Lord Grosville perceived them.

"Geoffrey Cliffe's arrived," he said to Ashe, as they reached him.

"Has he?" said Ashe, and turned to go up-stairs.

But Kershaw showed a lively interest. "You mean the traveller?" he asked of his host.

"I do. As mad as usual," said the old man. "He and my niece Kitty make a pair."

VI

WHEN Ashe returned to the drawing-room he found it filled with the sound of talk and laughter. But it was a talk and laughter in which the Grosville family seemed to have itself but little part. Lady Grosville sat stiffly on an early Victorian sofa, her spectacles on her nose, reading the *Times* of the preceding day, or appearing to read it. Amy Grosville, the eldest girl, was busy in a corner, putting the finishing touches to a piece of illumination; while Caroline, seated on the floor, was showing the small child of a neighbor how to put a picture-puzzle together. Lord Grosville was professedly in a farther room, talking with the Austrian count; but every other minute he strolled restlessly into the big drawing-room, and stood at the edge of the talk and laughter, only to turn on his heel again and go back to the count—who meanwhile appeared in the opening between the two rooms, his hands on his hips, eagerly watching Kitty Bristol and her companions, while waiting, as courtesy bade him, for the return of his host.

Ashe at once divined that the Grosville family were in revolt. Nor had he to look far to discover the cause.

Was that astonishing young lady in truth identical with the pensive figure of the morning? Kitty had doffed her black, and she wore a "demi-toilette" gown of the utmost elegance, of which the expensiveness had,

The Marriage of William Ashe

no doubt, already sunk deep into Lady Grosville's soul. At Grosville Park the new fashion of "tea-gowns" was not favorably regarded. It was thought to be a mere device of silly and extravagant women, and an "afternoon dress," though of greater pretensions than a morning gown, was still a sober affair, not in any way to be confounded with those decorative effects that nature and sound sense reserved for the evening.

But Kitty's dress was of some white silky material; and it displayed her slender throat and some portion of her thin white arms. The Dean's wife, Mrs. Winston, as she secretly studied it, felt an inward satisfaction; for here at last was one of those gowns she had once or twice gazed on with a covetous awe in the shop-windows of the Rue de la Paix, brought down to earth, and clothing a simple mortal. They were then real, and they could be worn by real women; which till now the Dean's wife had scarcely believed.

Alack! how becoming were these concoctions to minxes with fair hair and sylphlike frames! Kitty was radiant, triumphant; and Ashe was certain that Lady Grosville knew it, however she might barricade herself behind the *Times*. The girl's slim fingers gesticulated in aid of her tongue; one tiny foot swung lightly over the other; the glistening folds of the silk wrapped her in a shimmering whiteness, above which the fair head—negligently thrown back—shone out on a red background, made by the velvet chair in which she sat.

The Dean was placed close beside her, and was clearly enjoying himself enormously. And in front of her, absorbed in her, engaged, indeed, in hot and furious debate with her, stood the great man who had just arrived.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"How do you do, Cliffe?" said Ashe, as he approached. Geoffrey Cliffe turned sharply, and a perfunctory greeting passed between the two men.

"When did you arrive?" said Ashe, as he threw himself into an arm-chair.

"Last Tuesday. But that don't matter," said Cliffe, impatiently—"nothing matters—except that I must somehow defeat Lady Kitty!"

And he stood, looking down upon the girl in front of him, his hands on his sides, his queer countenance twitching with suppressed laughter. An odd figure, tall, spare, loosely jointed, surmounted by a pale parchment face, which showed a somewhat protruding chin, a long and delicate nose, and fine brows under a strange overhanging mass of fair hair. He had the dissipated, battered look of certain Vandyck cavaliers, and certainly no handsomeness of any accepted kind. But as Ashe well knew, the aspect and personality of Geoffrey Cliffe possessed for innumerable men and women, in English "society" and out of it, a fascination it was easier to laugh at than to explain.

Lady Kitty had eyes certainly for no one else. When he spoke of "defeating" her, she laughed her defiance, and a glance of battle passed between her and Cliffe. Cliffe, still holding her with his look, considered what new ground to break.

"What is the subject?" said Ashe.

"That men are vainer than women," said Kitty. "It's so true, it's hardly worth saying— isn't it? Mr. Cliffe talks nonsense about our love of clothes—and of being admired. As if that were vanity! Of course it's only our sense of duty."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Duty?" cried Cliffe, twisting his mustache. "To whom?"

"To the men, of course! If we didn't like clothes, if we didn't like being admired—where would you be?"

"Personally, I could get on," said Cliffe. "You expect us to be too much on our knees."

"As if we should ever get you there if it didn't amuse you!" said Kitty. "Hypocrites! If we don't dress, paint, chatter, and tell lies for you, you won't look at us—and if we do—"

"Of course, it all depends on how well it's done," threw in Cliffe.

Kitty laughed.

"That's judging by results. I look to the motive. I repeat, if I powder and paint, it's not because I'm vain, but because it's my painful duty to give you pleasure."

"And if it doesn't give me pleasure?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Call me stupid then—not vain. I ought to have done it better."

"In any case," said Ashe, "it's your duty to please us?"

"Yes—" sighed Kitty. "Worse luck!"

And she sank softly back in her chair, her eyes shining under the stimulus of the laugh that ran through her circle. The Dean joined in it uneasily, conscious, no doubt, of the sharp, crackling movements by which in the distance Lady Grosville was dumbly expressing herself—through the *Times*. Cliffe looked at the small figure a moment, then seized a chair and sat down in front of her, astride.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"I wonder why you want to please us?" he said, abruptly, his magnificent blue eyes upon her.

"Ah!" said Kitty, throwing up her hands, "if we only knew!"

"You find it in the tragedy of your sex?"

"Or comedy," said the Dean, rising. "I take you at your word, Lady Kitty. To-night it will be your duty to please *me*. Remember, you promised to say us some more French." He lifted an admonitory finger.

"I don't know any 'Athalie,'" said Kitty, demurely, crossing her hands upon her knee.

The Dean smiled to himself as he crossed the room to Lady Grosville, and endeavored by an impartial criticism of the new curate's manner and voice, as they had revealed themselves in church that morning, to distract her attention from her niece.

A hopeless task—for Kitty's personality was of the kind which absorbs, engulfs attention, do what the bystander will. Eyes and ears were drawn perforce into the little whirlpool that she made, their owners yielding them, now with delight, now with repulsion.

Mary Lyster, for instance, came in presently, fresh from a walk with Lady Edith Manley. She, too, had changed her dress. But it was a discreet and reasonable change, and Lady Grosville looked at her soft gray gown with its muslin collar and cuffs—delicately embroidered, yet of a nunlike cut and air notwithstanding—with a hot energy of approval, provoked entirely by Kitty's audacities. Mary meanwhile raised her eyebrows gently at the sight of Kitty. She swept past the group, giving a cool greeting to Geoffrey Cliffe, and presently settled herself in the farther room, attended by Louis Harman and

The Marriage of William Ashe

Darrell, who had just arrived by the afternoon train. Clearly she observed Kitty and observed her with dislike. The attitude of her companions was not so simple.

"What an amazing young woman!" said Harman, presently, under his breath, yet open-mouthed. "I suppose she and Cliffe are old friends."

"I believe they never met before," said Mary.

Darrell laughed.

"Lady Kitty makes short work of the preliminaries," he said; "she told me the other night life wasn't long enough to begin with talk about the weather."

"The weather?" said Harman. "At the present moment she and Cliffe seem to be discussing the 'Dame aux Camélias.' Since when do they take young girls to see that kind of thing in Paris?"

Miss Lyster gave a little cough, and bending forward said to Harman: "Lady Tranmore has shown me your picture. It is a dear, delicious thing! I never saw anything more heavenly than the angel."

Harman smiled a flattered smile. Mary Lyster referred to a copy of a "Filippo Lippi Annunciation" which he had just executed in water-color for Lady Tranmore, to whom he was devoted. He was, however, devoted to a good many peeresses, with whom he took tea, and for whom he undertook many harmless and elegant services. He painted their portraits, in small size, after pre-Raphaelite models, and he occasionally presented them with copies—a little weak, but charming—of their favorite Italian pictures. He and Mary began now to talk of Florence with much enthusiasm and many caressing adjectives. For Harman most things were "sweet"; for Mary, "interesting" or "suggestive." She talked fast

The Marriage of William Ashe

and fluently; a subtle observer might have guessed she wished it to be seen that for her Lady Kitty Bristol's flirtations, be they in or out of taste, were simply non-existent.

Darrell listened intermittently, watched Cliffe and Lady Kitty, and thought a good deal. That extraordinary girl was certainly "carrying on" with Cliffe, as she had "carried on" with Ashe on the night of her first acquaintance with him in St. James's Place. Ashe apparently took it with equanimity, for he was still sitting beside the pair, twisting a paper-knife and smiling, sometimes putting in a word, but more often silent, and apparently of no account at all to either Kitty or Cliffe.

Darrell knew that the new minister disliked and despised Geoffrey Cliffe; he was aware, too, that Cliffe returned these sentiments, and was not unlikely to be found attacking Ashe in public before long on certain points of foreign policy, where Cliffe conceived himself to be a master. The meeting of the two men under the Grosvilles' roof struck Darrell as curious. Why had Cliffe been invited by these very respectable and straitlaced people the Grosvilles? Darrell could only reflect that Lady Eleanor Cliffe, the traveller's mother, was probably connected with them by some of those innumerable and ever-ramifying links that hold together a certain large group of English families; and that, moreover, Lady Grosville, in spite of philanthropy and Evangelicalism, had always shown a rather pronounced taste in "lions"—of the masculine sort. Of the women to be met with at Grosville Park, one could be certain. Lady Grosville made no excuses for her own sex. But she was a sufficiently ambitious hostess to know that agreeable parties

The Marriage of William Ashe

are not constructed out of the saints alone. The men, therefore, must provide the sinners; and of some of the persons then most in vogue she was careful not to know too much. For, socially, one must live; and that being so, the strictness of to-day may have at any moment to be purchased by the laxity of to-morrow. Such, at any rate, was Darrell's analysis of the situation.

He was still astonished, however, when all was said. For Cliffe during the preceding winter, on his return from some remarkable travels in Persia, had paused on the Riviera, and an affair at Cannes with a French vicomtesse had got into the English papers. No one knew the exact truth of it; and a small volume of verse by Cliffe, published immediately afterwards—verse very distinguished, passionate, and obscure—had offered many clues, but no solution whatever. Nobody supposed, however, that the story was anything but a bad one. Moreover, the last book of travels—which had had an enormous success—contained one of the most malicious attacks on foreign missions that Darrell remembered. And if the missionaries had a supporter in England, it was Lady Grosville. Had she designs—material designs—on behalf of Miss Amy or Miss Caroline? Darrell smiled at the notion. Cliffe must certainly marry money, and was not to be captured by any Miss Amys—or Lady Kittys either, for the matter of that.

But?—Darrell glanced at the lady beside him, and his busy thoughts took a new turn. He had seen the greeting between Miss Lyster and Cliffe. It was cold; but all the same the world knew that they had once been friends. Was it some five years before that Miss Lyster,

The Marriage of William Ashe

then in the height of a brilliant season under the wing of Lady Tranmore, had been much seen in public with Geoffrey Cliffe? Then he had departed eastward, to explore the upper waters of the Mékong, and the gossip excited had died away. Of late her name had been rather coupled with that of William Ashe.

Well, so far as the world was concerned, she might mate with either—with the mad notoriety of Cliffe or the young distinction of Ashe. Darrell's bitter heart contracted as he reflected that only for him and the likes of him, men of the people, with average ability, and a scarcely average income, were maidens of Mary Lyster's dower and pedigree out of reach. Meanwhile he revenged himself by being her very good friend, and allowing himself at times much caustic plainness of speech in his talks with her.

"What are you three gossiping about?" said Ashe, strolling in presently from the other room to join them.

"As usual," said Darrell. "I am listening to perfection. Miss Lyster and Harman are discussing pictures."

Ashe stifled a little yawn. He threw himself down by Mary, vowing that there was no more pleasure to be got out of pictures now that people would try to know so much about them. Mary meanwhile raised herself involuntarily to look into the farther room, where the noise made by Cliffe and Lady Kitty had increased.

"They are going to sing," said Ashe, lazily—"and it won't be hymns."

In fact, Lady Kitty had opened the piano, and had begun the first bars of something French and operatic.

The Marriage of William Ashe

At the first sound of Kitty's music, however, Lady Grosville drew herself up; she closed the volume of Evangelical sermons for which she had exchanged the *Times*; she deposited her spectacles sharply on the table beside her.

"Amy!—Caroline!"

Those young ladies rose. So did Lady Grosville. Kitty meanwhile sat with suspended fingers and laughing eyes, waiting on her aunt's movements.

"Kitty, pray don't let me interfere with your playing," said Lady Grosville, with severe politeness—"but perhaps you would kindly put it off for half an hour. I am now going to read to the servants—"

"Gracious!" said Kitty, springing up. "I was going to play Mr. Cliffe some Offenbach."

"Ah, but the piano can be heard in the library, and your cousin Amy plays the harmonium—"

"*Mon Dieu!*" said Kitty. "We will be as quiet as mice. Or"—she made a quick step in pursuit of her aunt—"shall I come and sing, Aunt Lina?"

Ashe, in his shelter behind Mary Lyster, fell into a silent convulsion of laughter.

"No, thank you!" said Lady Grosville, hastily. And she rustled away followed by her daughters.

Kitty came flying into the inner room followed by Cliffe.

"What have I done?" she said, breathlessly, addressing Harman, who rose to greet her. "Mayn't one play the piano here on Sundays?"

"That depends," said Harman, "on what you play."

"Who made your English Sunday?" said Kitty, impetuously. "Je vous demande—*who?*"

The Marriage of William Ashe

She threw her challenge to all the winds of heaven—standing tiptoe, her hands poised on the back of a chair, the smallest and most delicate of furies.

"A breath unmakes it, as a breath has made," said Cliffe. "Come and play billiards, Lady Kitty. You said just now you played."

"Billiards!" said Harman, throwing up his hands. "On Sunday—*here*?"

"Can they hear the balls?" said Kitty, eagerly, with a gesture towards the library.

Mary Lyster, who had been perfunctorily looking at a book, laid it down.

"It would certainly greatly distress Lady Grosville," she said, in a voice studiously soft, but on that account perhaps all the more significant.

Kitty glanced at Mary, and Ashe saw the sudden red in her cheek. She turned provokingly to Cliffe. "There's quite half an hour, isn't there, before one need dress—"

"More," said Cliffe. "Come along."

And he made for the door, which he held open for her. It was now Mary Lyster's turn to flush—the rebuff had been so naked and unadorned. Ashe rose as Kitty passed him.

"Why don't you come, too?" she said, pausing. There was a flash from eyes deep and dark beneath a pair of wilful brows. "Aunt Lina would never be cross with *you*!"

"Thank you! I should be delighted to play buffer, but unfortunately I have some work I must do before dinner."

"Must you?" She looked at him uncertainly, then

The Marriage of William Ashe

at Cliffe. In the dusk of the large, heavily furnished room, the pale yet brilliant gold of her hair, her white dress, her slim energy and elegance drew all their eyes—even Mary Lyster's.

"I must," Ashe repeated, smiling. "I am glad your headache is so much better."

"It is not in the least better!"

"Then you disguise it like a heroine."

He stood beside her, looking down upon her, his height and strength measured against her smallness. Apparently his amused detachment, the slight dryness of his tone annoyed her. She made a tart reply and vanished through the door that Cliffe held open for her.

Ashe retired to his own room, dealt with some Foreign Office work, and then allowed himself a meditative smoke. The click of the billiard-balls had ceased abruptly about ten minutes after he had begun upon his papers; there had been voices in the hall, Lord Grosville's he thought among them; and now all was silence.

He thought of the events of the afternoon with mingled amusement and annoyance. Cliffe was an unscrupulous fellow, and the child's head might be turned. She should be protected from him in future—he vowed she should. Lady Tranmore should take it in hand. She had been a match for Cliffe in various other directions before this.

What brought the man, with his notorious character and antecedents, to Grosville Park—one of the dwindling number of country-houses in England where the old Puritan restrictions still held? It was said he was on the look-out for a post—Ashe, indeed, happened to know

The Marriage of William Ashe

it officially; and Lord Grosville had a good deal of influence. Moreover, failing an appointment, he was understood to be aiming at Parliament and office; and there were two safe county-seats within the Grosville sphere.

"Yet even when he wants a thing he can't behave himself in order to get it," thought Ashe. "Anybody else would have turned Sabbatarian for once, and refrained from flirting with the Grosvilles' niece. But that's Cliffe all over—and perhaps the best thing about him."

He might have added that as Cliffe was supposed to desire an appointment under either the Foreign Office or the Colonial Office, it might have been thought to his interest to show himself more urbane than he had in fact shown himself that afternoon to the new Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs. But Ashe rarely or never indulged himself in reflections of that kind. Besides, he and Cliffe knew each other too well for posing. There was a time when they had been on very friendly terms, and when Cliffe had been constantly in his mother's drawing-room. Lady Tranmore had a weakness for "influencing" young men of family and ability; and Cliffe, in fact, owed her a good deal. Then she had seen cause to think ill of him; and, moreover, his travels had taken him to the other side of the world. Ashe was now well aware that Cliffe reckoned on him as a hostile influence and would not try either to deceive or to propitiate him.

He thought Cliffe had been disagreeably surprised to see him that afternoon. Perhaps it was the sudden sense of antagonism acting on the man's excitable nature that had made him fling himself into the wild nonsense he had talked with Lady Kitty.

The Marriage of William Ashe

And thenceforward Ashe's thoughts were possessed by Kitty only—Kitty in her two aspects, of the morning and the afternoon. He dressed in a reverie, and went downstairs still dreaming.

At dinner he found himself responsible for Mary Lyster. Kitty was on the other side of the table, widely separated both from himself and Cliffe. She was in a little Empire dress of blue and silver, as extravagantly simple as her gown of the afternoon had been extravagantly elaborate.

Ashe observed the furtive study that the Grosville girls could not help bestowing upon her—upon her shoulder-straps and long, bare arms, upon her high waist and the blue and silver bands in her hair. Kitty herself sat in a pensive or proud silence. The Dean was beside her, but she scarcely spoke to him, and as to the young man from the neighborhood who had taken her in, he was to her as though he were not.

"Has there been a row?" Ashe inquired, in a low voice, of his companion.

Mary looked at him quietly.

"Lord Grosville asked them not to play—because of the servants."

"Good!" said Ashe. "The servants were, of course, playing cards in the house-keeper's room."

"Not at all. They were singing hymns with Lady Grosville."

Ashe looked incredulous.

"Only the slaveys and scullery maids that couldn't help themselves. Never mind. Was Lady Kitty amenable?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"She seems to have made Lord Grosville very angry. Lady Grosville and I smoothed him down."

"Did you?" said Ashe. "That was nice of you."

Mary colored a little, and did not reply. Presently Ashe resumed.

"Aren't you as sorry for her as I am?"

"For Lady Kitty? I should think she managed to amuse herself pretty well,"

"She seems to me the most deplorable tragic little person," said Ashe, slowly.

Miss Lyster laughed.

"I really don't see it," she said.

"Oh yes, you do," he persisted—"if you think a moment. Be kind to her—won't you?"

She drew herself up with a cold dignity.

"I confess that she has never attracted me in the least."

Ashe returned to his dinner, dimly conscious that he had spoken like a fool.

When the ladies had withdrawn, the conversation fell on some important news from the Far East contained in the Sunday papers that Geoffrey Cliffe had brought down, and presumed to form part of the despatches which the two ministers staying in the house had received that afternoon by Foreign Office messenger. The government of Teheran was in one of its periodical fits of ill-temper with England; had been meddling with Afghanistan, flirting badly with Russia, and bringing ridiculous charges against the British minister. An expedition to Bushire was talked of, and the Radical press was on the war-path. The cabinet minister said little. A Lord Privy Seal, reverentially credited with advising

The Marriage of William Ashe

royalty in its private affairs, need have no views on the Persian Gulf. But Ashe was appealed to and talked well. The minister at Teheran was an old friend of his, and he described the personal attacks made on him for political reasons by the Shah and his ministers with a humor which kept the table entertained.

Suddenly Cliffe interposed. He had been listening with restlessness, though Ashe, with pointed courtesy, had once or twice included him in the conversation. And presently, at a somewhat dramatic moment, he met a statement of Ashe's with a direct and violent contradiction. Ashe flushed, and a duel began between the two men of which the company were soon silent spectators. Ashe had the resources of official knowledge; Cliffe had been recently on the spot, and pushed home the advantage of the eye-witness with a covert insolence which Ashe bore with surprising carelessness and good-temper. In the end Cliffe said some outrageous things, at which Ashe laughed; and Lord Grosville abruptly dissolved the party.

Ashe went smiling out of the dining-room, caressing a fine white spaniel, as though nothing had happened. In crossing the hall Harman found himself alone with the Dean, who looked serious and preoccupied.

"That was a curious spectacle," said Harman. "Ashe's equanimity was amazing."

"I had rather have seen him angrier," said the Dean, slowly.

"He was always a very tolerant, easy-going fellow."

The Dean shook his head.

"A touch of *sæva indignatio* now and then would complete him."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Has he got it in him?"

"Perhaps not," said the little Dean, with a flash of expression that dignified all his frail person. "But without it he will hardly make a great man."

Meanwhile Geoffrey Cliffe, his strange, twisted face still vindictively aglow, made his way to Kitty Bristol's corner in the drawing-room. Mary Lyster was conscious of it, conscious also of a certain look that Kitty bestowed upon the entrance of Ashe, while Cliffe was opening a battery of mingled chaff and compliments that did not at first have much effect upon her. But William Ashe threw himself into conversation with Lady Edith Manley, and was presently, to all appearance, happily plunged in gossip, his tall person wholly at ease in a deep arm-chair, while Lady Edith bent over him with smiles. Meanwhile there was a certain desertion of Kitty on the part of the ladies. Lady Grosville hardly spoke to her, and the girls markedly avoided her. There was a moment when Kitty, looking round her, suddenly shook her small shoulders, and like a colt escaping from harness gave herself to riot. She and Cliffe amused themselves so well and so noisily that the whole drawing-room was presently uneasily aware of them. Lady Grosville shot glances of wrath, rose suddenly at one moment and sat down again; her girls talked more disjointedly than ever to the gentlemen who were civilly attending them; while, on the other hand, Miss Lyster's flow of conversation with Louis Harman was more softly copious than usual. At last the Dean's wife looked at the Dean, a signal of kind distress, and the Dean advanced.

"Lady Kitty," he said, taking a seat beside the pair, "have you forgotten you promised me some French?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

Kitty turned on him a hot and mutinous face.

"Did I? What shall I say? Some Alfred de Musset?"

"No," said the Dean, "I think not."

"Some—some"—she cudgelled her memory—"some Théophile Gautier?"

"No, certainly not!" said the Dean, hastily.

"Well, as I don't know a word of him—" laughed Kitty.

"That was mischievous," said the Dean, raising a finger. "Let me suggest Lamartine."

Kitty shook her head obstinately. "I never learned one line."

"Then some of the old fellows," said the Dean, persuasively. "I long to hear you in Corneille or Racine. That we should *all* enjoy."

And suddenly his wrinkled hand fell kindly on the girl's small, chilly fingers and patted them. Their eyes met, Kitty's wild and challenging, the Dean's full of that ethereal benevolence which blended so agreeably with his character as courtier and man of the world. There was a bright sweetness in them which seemed to say: "Poor child! I understand. But be a *little* good—as well as clever—and all will be well."

Suddenly Kitty's look wavered and fell. All the harshness dissolved from her thin young beauty. She turned from Cliffe, and the Dean saw her quiver with submission.

"I think I could say some 'Polyeucte,'" she said, gently.

The Dean clapped his hands and rose.

"Lady Grosville," he said, raising his voice—"Ladies

The Marriage of William Ashe

and gentlemen, Lady Kitty has promised to say us some more French poetry. You remember how admirably she recited last night. But this is Sunday, and she will give us something in a different vein."

Lady Grosville, who had risen impatiently, sat down again. There was a general movement; chairs were turned or drawn forward till a circle formed. Meanwhile the Dean consulted with Kitty and resumed:

"Lady Kitty will recite a scene from Corneille's beautiful tragedy of 'Polyeucte'—the scene in which Pauline, after witnessing the martyrdom of her husband, who has been beheaded for refusing to sacrifice to the gods, returns from the place of execution so melted by the love and sacrifice she has beheld that she opens her heart then and there to the same august faith and pleads for the same death."

The Dean seated himself, and Kitty stepped into the centre of the circle. She thought a moment, her lips moving, as though she recalled the lines. Then she looked down at her bare arms, and dress, frowned, and suddenly approached Lady Edith Manley.

"May I have that?" she said, pointing to a lace cloak that lay on Lady Edith's knee. "I am rather cold."

Lady Edith handed it to her, and she threw it round her.

"Actress!" said Cliffe, under his breath, with a grin of amusement.

At any rate, her impulse served her well. Her form and dress disappeared under a cloud of white. She became in a flash, so to speak, evangelized—a most innocent and spiritual apparition. Her beautiful head, her kindled and transfigured face, her little hand on the

The Marriage of William Ashe

white folds, these alone remained to mingle their impression with the austere and moving tragedy which her lips recited. Her audience looked on at first with the embarrassed or hostile air which is the Englishman's natural protection against the great things of art; then for those who understood French the high passion and the noble verse began to tell; while those who could not follow were gradually enthralled by the gestures and tones with which the slight, vibrating creature, whom but ten minutes before most of them had regarded as a mere noisy flirt, suggested and conveyed the finest and most compelling shades of love, faith, and sacrifice.

When she ceased, there was a moment's profound silence. Then Lady Edith, drawing a long breath, expressed the welcome commonplace which restored the atmosphere of daily life.

"How *could* you remember it all?"

Kitty sat down, her lip trembling scornfully.

"I had to say it every week at the convent."

"I understand," said Cliffe in Darrell's ear—"that last night she was Doña Sol. An accommodating young woman."

Meanwhile Kitty looked up to find Ashe beside her. He said, "Magnificent!"—but it did not matter to her what he said. His face told her that she had moved him, and that he was incapable of any foolish chatter about it. A smile of extraordinary sweetness sprang into her eyes; and when Lady Grosville came up to thank her, the girl impetuously rose, and, in the foreign way, kissed her hand, courtesying. Lord Grosville said, heartily, "Upon my word, Kitty, you ought to go on the stage!" and she smiled upon him, too, in a flutter of feeling, forgetting

The Marriage of William Ashe

his scolding and her own impertinence, before dinner. The revulsion, indeed, throughout the company—with two exceptions—was complete. For the rest of the evening Kitty basked in sunshine and flattery. She met it with a joyous gentleness, and the little figure, still bedraped in white, became the centre of the room's kindness.

The Dean was triumphant.

"My dear Miss Lyster," he said, presently, finding himself near that lady, "did you ever hear anything better done? A most remarkable talent!"

Mary smiled.

"I am wondering," she said, "what they teach you in French convents—and why! It is all so singular,—isn't it?"

Late that night Ashe entered his room—before his usual time, however. He had tired even of Lord Grosville's chat, and had left the smoking-room still talking. Indeed, he wished to be alone, and there was that in his veins which told him that a new motive had taken possession of his life.

He sat beside the open window reviewing the scenes and feelings of the day—his interview with Kitty in the morning—the teasing coquette of the afternoon—the inspired poetic child of the evening. Rapidly, but none the less strongly and steadfastly, he made up his mind. He would ask Kitty Bristol to marry him, and he would ask her immediately.

Why? He scarcely knew her. His mother, his family would think it madness. No doubt it was madness. Yet, as far as he could explain his impulse himself,

The Marriage of William Ashe

it depended on certain fundamental facts in his own nature—it was in keeping with his deepest character. He had an inbred love of the difficult, the unconventional in life, of all that piqued and stimulated his own superabundant consciousness of resource and power. And he had a tenderness of feeling, a gift of chivalrous pity, only known to the few, which was in truth always hungrily on the watch, like some starved faculty that cannot find its outlet. The thought of this beautiful child, in the hands of such a mother as Madame d'Estrées, and rushing upon risks illustrated by the half-mocking attentions of Geoffrey Cliffe, did in truth wring his heart. With a strange imaginative clearness he foresaw her future, he beheld her the prey at once of some bad fellow and of her own temperament. She would come to grief; he saw the prescience of it in her already; and what a waste would be there!

No!—he would step in—capture her before these ways and whims, now merely bizarre or foolish, stiffened into what might in truth destroy her. His pulse quickened as he thought of the development of this beauty, the ripening of this intelligence. Never yet had he seen a girl whom he much wished to marry. He was easily repelled by stupidity, still more by mere amiability. Some touch of acid, of roughness in the fruit—that drew him, in politics, thought, love. And if she married him he vowed to himself, proudly, that she would find him no tyrant. Many a man might marry her who would then fight her and try to break her. All that was most fastidious and characteristic in Ashe revolted from such a notion. With him she should have *freedom*—whatever it might cost. He asked himself deliberately, whether

The Marriage of William Ashe

after marriage he could see her flirting with other men, as she had flirted that day with Cliffe, and still refrain from coercing her. And his question was answered, or rather put aside, first by the confidence of nascent love—he would love her so well and so loyally that she would naturally turn to him for counsel; and then by the clear perception that she was a creature of mind rather than sense, governed mainly by the caprices and curiosities of the *intelligence*, combined with a rather cold, indifferent temperament. One moment throwing herself wildly into a dangerous or exciting intimacy, the next, parting with a laugh, and without a regret—it was thus he saw her in the future, even as a wife. “She may scandalize half the world,” he said to himself, stubbornly—“I shall understand her!”

But his mother?—his friends?—his colleagues? He knew well his mother’s ambitions for him, and the place that he held in her heart. Could he without cruelty impose upon her such a daughter as Kitty Bristol? Well!—his mother had a very large experience of life, and much natural independence of mind. He trusted her to see the promise in this untamed and gifted creature; he counted on the sense of power that Lady Tranmore possessed, and which would but find new scope in the taming of Kitty.

But Kitty’s mother? Kitty must, of course, be rescued from Madame d’Estrées—must find a new and truer mother in Lady Tranmore. But money would do it; and money must be lavished.

Then, almost for the first time, Ashe felt a conscious delight in wealth and birth. *Panache*? He could give it her—the little, wild, lovely thing! Luxury, society,

The Marriage of William Ashe

adoration—all should be hers. She should be so loved and cherished, she must needs love in turn.

His dreams were delicious; and the sudden fear into which he fell at the end lest after all Kitty should mock and turn from him, was only in truth another pleasure. No delay! Circumstances might develop at any moment and sweep her from him. Now or never must he snatch her from difficulty and disgrace—let hostile tongues wag as they pleased—and make her his.

His political future? He knew well the influence which, in these days of universal publicity, a man's private affairs may have on his public career. And in truth his heart was in that career, and the thought of endangering it hurt him. Certainly it would recommend him to nobody that he should marry Madame d'Estrées' daughter. On the other hand, what favor did he want of anybody? save what work and "knowing more than the other fellows" might compel? The cynic in him was well aware that he had already what other men fought for—family, money, and position. Society must accept his wife; and Kitty, once mellowed by happiness and praise, might live, laugh, and rattle as she pleased.

As to strangeness and caprice, the modern world delights in them; "the violent take it by force." There is, indeed, a dividing-line; but it was a love-marriage that should keep Kitty on the safe side of it.

He stood lost in a very ecstasy of resolve, when suddenly there was a sharp movement outside, and a flash of white among the yew hedges bordering the formal garden on which his windows looked. The night outside was still and veiled, but of the flash of white he was certain—and of a step on the gravel.

The Marriage of William Ashe

Something fell beside him, thrown from outside. He picked it up, and found a flower weighted by a stone, tied into a fold of ribbon.

"Madcap!" he said to himself, his heart beating to suffocation.

Then he stole out of his room, and down a small, winding staircase which led directly to the garden and a door beside the orangery. He had to unbolt the door, and as he did so a dog in one of the basement rooms began to bark. But there could be no flinching, though the whole thing was of an imprudence which pricked his conscience. To slip along the shadowed side of the orangery, to cross the space of clouded light beyond, and gain the darkness of the ilex avenue beyond was soon done. Then he heard a soft laugh, and a little figure fled before him. He followed and overtook.

Kitty Bristol turned upon him.

"Didn't I throw straight?" she said, triumphantly. "And they say girls can't throw."

"But why did you throw at all?" he said, capturing her hand.

"Because I wanted to talk to you. And I was restless and couldn't sleep. Why did you never come and talk to me this afternoon? And why"—she beat her foot angrily—"did you let me go and play billiards alone with Mr. Cliffe?"

"Let you!" cried Ashe. "As if anybody could have prevented you!"

"One sees, of course, that you detest Mr. Cliffe," said the whiteness beside him.

"I didn't come here to talk about Geoffrey Cliffe. I

The Marriage of William Ashe

won't talk about him! Though, of course, you must know—"

"That I flirted with him abominably all the afternoon? *C'est vrai—c'est ab-sol-ument vrai!* And I shall always want to flirt with him, wherever I am—and whatever I may be doing."

"Do as you please," said Ashe, dryly, "but I think you will get tired."

"No, no—he excites me! He is bad, false, selfish, but he excites me. He talks to very few women—one can see that. And all the women want to talk to him. He used to admire Miss Lyster, and now he dislikes her. But she doesn't dislike him. No! she would marry him to-morrow if he asked her."

"You are very positive," said Ashe. "Allow me to say that I entirely disagree with you."

"You don't know anything about her," said the teasing voice.

"She is my cousin, mademoiselle."

"What does that matter? I know much more than you do, though I have only seen her two days. I know that—well, I am afraid of her!"

"Afraid of her? Did you come out—may I ask—determined to talk nonsense?"

"I came out—never mind! I *am* afraid of her. She hates me. I think"—he felt a shiver in the air—"she will do me harm if she can."

"No one shall do you harm," said Ashe, his tone changing, "if you will only trust yourself—"

She laughed merrily.

"To you? Oh! you'd soon throw it up."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Try me!" he said, approaching her. "Lady Kitty, I have something to say to you."

Suddenly she shrank away from him. He could not see her face, and had nothing to guide him.

"I haven't yet known you three weeks," he said, overmastered by something passionate and profound. "I don't know what you will say—whether you can put up with me. But I know my own mind—I shall not change. I—I love you. I ask you to marry me."

A silence. The night seemed to have grown darker. Then a small hand seized his, and two soft lips pressed themselves upon it. He tried to capture her, but she evaded him.

"You—you really and actually—want to marry me?"

"I do, Kitty, with all my heart."

"You remember about my mother—about Alice?"

"I remember everything. We would face it together."

"And—you know what I told you about my bad temper?"

"Some nonsense, wasn't it? But I should be bored by the domestic dove. I want the hawk, Kitty, with its quick wings and its daring bright eyes."

She broke from him with a cry.

"You must listen. I *have*—a wicked, odious, ungovernable temper. I should make you miserable."

"Not at all," said Ashe. "I should take it very calmly. I am made that way."

"And then—I don't know how to put it—but I have fancies—overpowering fancies—and I must follow them. I have one now for Geoffrey Cliffe."

Ashe laughed.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Oh, that won't last."

"Then some other will come after it. And I can't help it. It is my head"—she tapped her forehead lightly—"that seems on fire."

Ashe at last slipped his arm round her.

"But it is your heart—you will give me."

She pushed him away from her and held him at arm's-length.

"You are very rich, aren't you?" she said, in a muffled voice.

"I am well off. I can give you all the pretty things you want."

"And some day you will be Lord Tranmore?"

"Yes, when my poor father dies," he said, sighing. He felt her fingers caress his hand again. It was a spirit touch, light and tender.

"And every one says you are so clever—you have such prospects. Perhaps you will be Prime Minister."

"Well, there's no saying," he threw out, laughing—"if you'll come and help."

He heard a sob.

"Help! I should be the ruin of you. I should spoil everything. You don't know the mischief I can do. And I can't help it, it's in my blood."

"You would like the game of politics too much to spoil it, Kitty." His voice broke and lingered on the name. "You would want to be a great lady and lead the party."

"Should I? Could you ever teach me how to behave?"

"You would learn by nature. Do you know, Kitty, how clever you are?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Yes," she sighed. "I am clever. But there is always something that hinders—that brings failure."

"How old are you?" he said, laughing. "Eighteen—or eighty?"

Suddenly he put out his arms, enfolding her. And she, still sobbing, raised her hands, clasped them round his neck, and clung to him like a child.

"Oh! I knew—I knew—when I first saw your face. I had been so miserable all day—and then you looked at me—and I wanted to tell you all. Oh, I adore you—I adore you!" Their faces met. Ashe tasted a moment of rapture; and knew himself free at last of the great company of poets and of lovers.

They slipped back to the house, and Ashe saw her disappear by a door on the farther side of the orangery—noiselessly, without a sound. Except that just at the last she drew him to her and breathed a sacred whisper in his ear.

"Oh! what—what will Lady Tranmore say?"

Then she fled. But she left her question behind her, and when the dawn came Ashe found that he had spent half the night in trying anew to frame some sort of an answer to it.

PART II

THREE YEARS AFTER

"The world an ancient murderer is."

VII

HER ladyship will be in before six, my lady. I was to be sure and ask you to wait, if you came before, and to tell you that her ladyship had gone to Madame Fanchette about her dress for the ball."

So said Lady Kitty's maid. Lady Tranmore hesitated, then said she would wait, and asked that Master Henry might be brought down.

The maid went for the child, and Lady Tranmore entered the drawing-room. The Ashes had been settled since their marriage in a house in Hill Street—a house to which Kitty had lost her heart at first sight. It was old and distinguished, covered here and there with eighteenth-century decoration, once, no doubt, a little florid and coarse beside the finer work of the period, but now agreeably blunted and mellowed by time. Kitty had had her impetuous and decided way with the furnishing of it; and, though Lady Tranmore professed to admire it, the result was, in truth, too French and too pagan for her taste. Her own room reflected the rising worship of Morris and Burne-Jones, of which, indeed, she had been an adept from the beginning. Her walls were covered by the well-known pomegranate or jasmine or sunflower patterns; her hangings were of a mystic greenish-blue; her pictures were drawn either from the Italian primitives or their modern followers. Celtic romance,

The Marriage of William Ashe

Christian symbolism, all that was touching, other-worldly, and obscure—our late English form, in fact, of the great Romantic reaction—it was amid influences of this kind that Lady Tranmore lived and fed her own imagination. The dim, suggestive, and pathetic; twilight rather than dawn, autumn rather than spring; yearning rather than fulfilment; “the gleam” rather than noon-day: it was in this half-lit, richly colored sphere that she and most of her friends saw the tent of Beauty pitched.

But Kitty would have none of it. She quoted French sceptical remarks about the legs and joints of the Burne-Jones knights; she declared that so much pattern made her dizzy; and that the French were the only nation in the world who understood a *salon*, whether as upholstery or conversation. Accordingly, in days when these things were rare, the girl of eighteen made her new husband provide her with white-panelled walls, lightly gilt, and with a Persian carpet of which the mass was of a plain, blackish gray, and only the border was allowed to flower. A few Louis-Quinze girandoles on the walls, a Vernis-Martin screen, an old French clock, two or three inlaid cabinets, and a collection of lightly built chairs and settees in the French mode—this was all she would allow; and while Lady Tranmore’s room was always crowded, Kitty’s, which was much smaller, had always an air of space. French books were scattered here and there; and only one picture was admitted. That was a Watteau sketch of a group from “L’Embarquement pour Cythère.” Kitty adored it; Lady Tranmore thought it absurd and disagreeable.

As she entered the room now, on this May afternoon, she looked round it with her usual distaste. On several

The Marriage of William Ashe

of the chairs large illustrated books were lying. They contained pictures of seventeenth and eighteenth century costume—one of them displayed a colored engraving of a brilliant Madame de Pompadour, by Boucher.

The maid who followed her into the room began to remove the books.

"Her ladyship has been choosing her costume, my lady," she explained, as she closed some of the volumes.

"Is it settled?" said Lady Tranmore.

The maid replied that she believed so, and, bringing a volume which had been laid aside with a mark in it, she opened on a fantastic plate of Madame de Longueville, as Diana, in a gorgeous hunting-dress.

Lady Tranmore looked at it in silence; she thought it unseemly, with its bare ankles and sandalled feet, and likely to be extremely expensive. For this Diana of the Fronde sparkled with jewels from top to toe, and Lady Tranmore felt certain that Kitty had already made William promise her the counterpart of the magnificent diamond crescent that shone in the coiffure of the goddess.

"It really seemed to be the only one that suited her ladyship," said the maid, in a deprecating voice.

"I dare say it will look very well," said Lady Tranmore. "And Fanchette is to make it?"

"If her ladyship is not too late," said the maid, smiling. "But she has taken such a long time to make up her mind—"

"And Fanchette, of course, is driven to death. All the world seems to have gone mad about this ball."

Lady Tranmore shrugged her shoulders in a slight disgust. She was not going. Since her elder son's

The Marriage of William Ashe

death she had had no taste for spectacles of the kind. But she knew very well that fashionable London was talking and thinking of nothing else; she heard that the print-room of the British Museum was every day besieged by an eager crowd of fair ladies, claiming the services of the museum officials from dewy morn till eve; that historic costumes and famous jewels were to be lavished on the affair; that those who were not invited had not even the resource of contempt, so unquestioned and indubitable was the prospect of a really magnificent spectacle; and that the dress-makers of Paris and London, if they survived the effort, would reap a marvellous harvest.

"And Mr. Ashe—do you know if he is going, after all?" she asked of the maid as the latter was retreating.

"Mr. Ashe says he will, if he may wear just court-dress," said the maid, smiling. "Not unless. And her ladyship's afraid it won't be allowed."

"She'll make him go in costume," thought Lady Tranmore. "And he will do it, or anything, to avoid a scene."

The maid retired, and Lady Tranmore was left alone. As she sat waiting, a thought occurred to her. She rang for the butler.

"Where is the *Times*?" she asked, when he appeared. The man replied that it was no doubt in Mr. Ashe's room, and he would bring it.

"Kitty has probably not looked at it," thought the visitor. When the paper arrived she turned at once to the Parliamentary report. It contained an important speech by Ashe in the House the night before. Lady Tranmore had been disturbed in the reading of it that

The Marriage of William Ashe

morning, and had still a few sentences to finish. She read them with pride, then glanced again at the leading article on the debate, and at the flattering references it contained to the knowledge, courtesy, and debating power of the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs.

"Mr. Ashe," said the *Times*, "has well earned the promotion he is now sure to receive before long. In those important rearrangements of some of the higher offices which cannot be long delayed, Mr. Ashe is clearly marked out for a place in the cabinet. He is young, but he has already done admirable service; and there can be no question that he has a great future before him."

Lady Tranmore put down the paper and fell into a reverie. A great future? Yes—if Kitty permitted—if Kitty could be managed. At present it appeared to William's mother that the caprices of his wife were endangering the whole development of his career. There were wheels within wheels, and the newspapers knew very little about them.

Three years, was it, since the marriage? She looked back to her dismay when William brought her the news, though it seemed to her that in some sort she had foreseen it from the moment of his first mention of Kitty Bristol—with its eager appeal to her kindness, and that new and indefinable something in voice and manner which put her at once on the alert.

Ought she to have opposed it more strongly? She had, indeed, opposed it; and for a whole wretched week she who had never yet gainsaid him in anything had argued and pleaded with her son, attempting at the same time to bring in his uncles to wrestle with him, seeing that his poor paralyzed father was of no account, and so

The Marriage of William Ashe

to make a stubborn family fight of it. But she had been simply disarmed and beaten down by William's sweetness, patience, and good-humor. Never had he been so determined, and never so lovable.

It had been made abundantly plain to her that no wife, however exacting and adorable, should ever rob her, his mother, of one tittle of his old affection—nay, that, would she only accept Kitty, only take the little forlorn creature into the shelter of her motherly arms, even a more tender and devoted attention than before, on the part of her son, would be surely hers. He spoke, moreover, the language of sound sense about his proposed bride. That he was in love, passionately in love, was evident; but there were moments when he could discuss Kitty, her family, her bringing-up, her gifts and defects, with the same cool acumen, the same detachment, apparently, he might have given, say, to the Egyptian or the Balkan problem. Lady Tranmore was not invited to bow before a divinity; she was asked to accept a very gifted and lovely child, often troublesome and provoking, but full of a glorious promise which only persons of discernment, like herself and Ashe, could fully realize. He told her, with a laugh, that she could never have behaved even tolerably to a stupid daughter-in-law. Whereas, let London and society and a few years of love and living do their work, and Kitty would make one of the leading women of her time, as Lady Tranmore had been before her. "You'll help her, you'll train her, you'll put her in the way," he had said, kissing his mother's hand. "And you'll see that in the end we shall both of us be so conceited to have had the making of her there'll be no holding us."

The Marriage of William Ashe

Well, she had yielded—of course she had yielded. She had explained the matter, so far as she could, to the dazed wits of her paralyzed husband. She had propitiated the family on both sides; she had brought Kitty to stay with her, and had advised on the negotiations which banished Madame d'Estrées from London and the British Isles, in return for a handsome allowance and the payment of her debts; and, finally, she had with difficulty allowed the Grosvilles to provide the trousseau and arrange the marriage from Grosville Park, so eager had she grown in her accepted task.

And there had been many hours of high reward. Kitty had thrown herself at first upon William's mother with all the effusion possible. She had been docile, caressing, brilliant. Lady Tranmore had become almost as proud of her gifts, her social effect, and her fast advancing beauty as Ashe himself. Kitty's whims and humors; her passion for this person, and her hatred of that; her love of splendor and indifference to debt; her contempt of opinion and restraint, seemed to her, as to Ashe, the mere crude growth of youth. When she looked at Ashe, so handsome, agreeable, and devoted, at his place and prestige in the world, his high intelligence and his personal attraction, Ashe's mother must needs think that Kitty's mere cleverness would soon reveal to her her extraordinary good-fortune; and that whereas he was now at her feet, she before long would be at his.

Three years! Lady Tranmore looked back upon them with feelings that wavered like smoke before a wind. A year of excitement, a year of illness, a year of extravagance, shaken moreover by many strange gusts of temper and caprice, it was so she might have sum-

The Marriage of William Ashe

marized them. First, a most promising début in London. Kitty welcomed on all hands with enthusiasm as Ashe's wife and her own daughter-in-law, fêted to the top of her bent, smiled on at Court, flattered by the country-houses, always exquisitely dressed, smiling and eager, apparently full of ambition for Ashe no less than for herself, a happy, notorious, busy little person, with a touch of wildness that did but give edge to her charm and keep the world talking.

Then, the birth of the boy, and Kitty's passionate, ungovernable recoil from the deformity that showed itself almost immediately after his birth—a form of infantile paralysis involving a slight but incurable lameness. Lady Tranmore could recall weeks of remorseful fondling, alternating with weeks of neglect; continued illness and depression on Kitty's part, settling after a while into a petulant melancholy for which the baby's defect seemed but an inadequate cause; Ashe's tender anxiety, his willingness to throw up Parliament, office, everything, that Kitty might travel and recover; and those huge efforts by which she and his best friends in the House had held him back—when Kitty, it seemed, cared little or nothing whether he sacrificed his future or not. Finally, she herself, with the assistance of a new friend of Kitty's, had become Kitty's nurse, had taken her abroad when Ashe could not be spared, had watched over her, and humored her, and at last brought her back—so the doctors said—restored.

Was it really recovery? At any rate, Lady Tranmore was often inclined to think that since the return to London—now about a twelvemonth since—both she and William had had to do with a different Kitty. Young

The Marriage of William Ashe

as she still was, the first exquisite softness of the expanding life was gone; things harder, stranger, more inexplicable than any which those who knew her best had yet perceived, seemed now and then to come to the surface, like wreckage in a summer sea.

The opening door disturbed these ponderings. The nurse appeared, carrying the little boy. Lady Tranmore took him on her knee and caressed him. He was a piteous, engaging child, generally very docile, but liable at times to storms of temper out of all proportion to the fragility of his small person. His grandmother was inclined to look upon his passions as something external and inflicted—the entering-in of the Blackwater devil to plague a tiny creature that, normally, was of a divine and clinging sweetness. She would have taught him religion, as his only shield against himself; but neither his father nor his mother was religious; and Harry was likely to grow up a pagan.

He leaned now against her breast, and she, whose inmost nature was maternity, delighted in the pressure of the tiny body, crooning songs to him when they were left alone, and pausing now and then to pity and kiss the little shrunken foot that hung beside the other.

She was interrupted by a soft entrance and the rustle of a dress.

“Ah, Margaret!” she said, looking round and smiling.

The girl who had come in approached her, shook hands, and looked down at the baby. She was fair-haired and wore spectacles; her face was round and childish, her eyes round and blue, with certain lines

The Marriage of William Ashe

about them, however, which showed that she was no longer in her first youth.

"I came to see if I could do anything to-day for Kitty. I know she is very busy about the ball—"

"Head over ears apparently," said Lady Tranmore. "Everybody has lost their wits. I see Kitty has chosen her dress."

"Yes, if Fanchette can make it all right. Poor Kitty! She has been in such a state of mind. I think I'll go on with these invitations."

And, taking off her gloves and hat, Margaret French went to the writing-table like one intimately acquainted with the room and its affairs, took up a pile of cards and envelopes which lay upon it, and, bringing them to Lady Tranmore's side, began to work upon them.

"I did about half yesterday," she explained; "but I see Kitty hasn't been able to touch them, and it is really time they were out."

"For their party next week?"

"Yes. I hope Kitty won't tire herself out. It has been a rush lately."

"Does she ever rest?"

"Never—as far as I can see. And I am afraid she has been very much worried."

"About that silly affair with Prince Stephan?" said Lady Tranmore.

Margaret French nodded. "She vows that she meant no harm, and did no harm, and that it has been all malice and exaggeration. But one can see she has been hurt."

"Well, if you ask me," said Lady Tranmore, in a low voice, "I think she deserved to be."

The Marriage of William Ashe

Their eyes met, the girl's full of a half-smiling, half-soft consideration. Lady Tranmore, on the other hand, had flushed proudly, as though the mere mention of the matter to which she had referred had been galling to her. Kitty, in fact, had just been guilty of an escapade which had set the town talking, and even found its way here and there in the newspapers. The heir to a European monarchy had been recently visiting London. A romantic interest surrounded him; for a lady, not of a rank sufficiently high to mate with his, had lately drowned herself for love of him, and the young man's melancholy good looks, together with the magnificent apathy of his manner, drew after him a chain of gossip. Kitty failed to meet him in society; certain invitations that for once she coveted did not arrive; and in a fit of pique she declared that she would make acquaintance with him in her own way. On a certain occasion, when the Princeling was at the play, his attention was drawn to a small and dazzling creature in a box opposite his own. Presently, however, there was a commotion in this box. The dazzling creature had fainted; and rumor sent round the name of Lady Kitty Ashe. The Prince despatched an equerry to make inquiries, and the inquiries were repeated that evening in Hill Street. Recovery was prompt, and the Prince let it be known that he wished to meet the lady. Invitations from high quarters descended upon Kitty; she bore herself with an engaging carelessness, and the melancholy youth was soon spending far more pains upon her than he had yet been known to spend upon any other English beauties presented to him. Ashe and Kitty's friends laughed; the old general in charge of the Princeling took alarm. And presently Kitty's audacities,

The Marriage of William Ashe

alack, carried away her discretion; she began, moreover, to boast of her ruse. Whispers crept round; and the general's ears were open. In a few days Kitty's triumph went the way of all earthly things. At a Court ball, to which her vanity had looked forward, unwarned, the Prince passed her with glassy eyes, returning the barest bow to her smiling courtesy. She betrayed nothing; but somehow the thing got out, and set in motion a perfect hurricane of talk. It was rumored that the old Prime Minister, Lord Parham, had himself said a caustic word to Lady Kitty, that Royalty was annoyed, and that William Ashe had for once scolded his wife seriously.

Lady Tranmore was well aware that there was, at any rate, no truth in the last report; but she also knew that there was a tone of sharpness in the London chatter that was new with regard to Kitty. It was as though a certain indulgence was wearing out, and what had been amusement was passing into criticism.

She and Margaret French discussed the matter a little, *sotto voce*, while Margaret went on with the invitations and Lady Tranmore made a French toy dance and spin for the babe's amusement. Their tone was one of close and friendly intimacy, an intimacy based clearly upon one common interest—their relation to Kitty. Margaret French was one of those beings in whom, for our salvation, this halting, hurried world of ours is still on the whole rich. She was unmarried, thirty-five, and poor. She lived with her brother, a struggling doctor, and she had come across Kitty in the first months of Kitty's married life, on some fashionable Soldiers' Aid Committee, where Margaret had done the work and Kitty with the other great ladies had reaped the fame.

The Marriage of William Ashe

Kitty had developed a fancy for her, and presently could not live without her. But Margaret, though it soon became evident that she had taken Kitty and, in due time, the child—Ashe, too, for the matter of that—deep into her generous heart, preserved a charming measure in the friendship offered her. She would owe Kitty nothing, either socially or financially. When Kitty's smart friends appeared, she vanished. Nobody in her own world ever heard her mention the name of Lady Kitty Ashe, largely as that name was beginning to figure in the gossip of the day. But there were few things concerning the Hill Street ménage that Lady Tranmore could not safely and rightly discuss with her; and even Ashe himself went to her for counsel.

"I am afraid this has made things worse than ever with the Parhams," said Lady Tranmore, presently.

Margaret shook her head anxiously.

"I hope Kitty won't throw over their dinner next week."

"She is talking of it!"

"Yesterday she had almost made up her mind," said Margaret, reluctantly. "Perhaps you will persuade her. But she has been terribly angry with Lord Parham—and with Lady P., too."

"And it was to be a reconciliation dinner, after the old nonsense between her and Lady Parham," sighed Lady Tranmore. "It was planned for Kitty entirely. And she is to act something, isn't she, with that young De La Rivière from the embassy? I believe the Princess is coming—expressly to meet her. I have been hearing of it on all sides. She *can't* throw it over!"

Margaret shrugged her shoulders. "I believe she will."

The Marriage of William Ashe

The older lady's face showed a sudden cloud of indignation.

"William must really put his foot down," she said, in a low, decided voice. "It is, of course, most important—just now—"

She said no more, but Margaret French looked up, and they exchanged glances.

"Let's hope," said Margaret, "that Mr. Ashe will be able to pacify her. Ah, there she is."

For the front door closed heavily, and instantly the house was aware from top to toe of a flutter of talk and a frou-frou of skirts. Kitty ran up the stairs and into the drawing-room, still talking, apparently, to the footman behind her, and stopped short at the sight of Lady Tranmore and Margaret. A momentary shadow passed across her face; then she came forward all smiles.

"Why, they never told me down-stairs!" she said, taking a hand of each caressingly, and slipping into a seat between them. "Have I lost much of you?"

"Well, I must soon be off," said Lady Tranmore. "Harry has been entertaining me."

"Oh, Harry; is he there?" said Kitty, in another voice, perceiving the child behind his grandmother's dress as he sat on the floor, where Lady Tranmore had just deposited him.

The baby turned towards his beautiful mother, and, as he saw her, a little wandering smile began to spread from his uncertain lips to his deep-brown eyes, till his whole face shone, held to hers as to a magnet, in a still enchantment.

"Come!" said Kitty, holding out her hands.

With difficulty the child pulled himself towards her,

The Marriage of William Ashe

moving in sideway fashion along the floor, and dragging the helpless foot after him. Again the shadow crossed Kitty's face. She caught him up, kissed him, and moved to ring the bell.

"Shall I take him up-stairs?" said Margaret.

"Why, he seems to have only just come down!" said Lady Tranmore. "Must he go?"

"He can come down again afterwards," said Kitty. "I want to talk to you. Take him, Margaret."

The babe went without a whimper, still following his mother with his eyes.

"He looks rather frail," said Lady Tranmore. "I hope you'll soon be sending him to the country, Kitty."

"He's very well," said Kitty. Then she took off her hat and looked at the invitations Margaret had been writing.

"Heavens, I had forgotten all about them! What an angel is Margaret! I really can't remember these things. They ought to do themselves by clock-work. And now Fanchette and this ball are enough to drive one wild."

She lifted her hands to her face and pressed back the masses of fair hair that were tumbling round it, with a gesture of weariness.

"Fanchette can make your dress?"

"She says she will, but I couldn't make her understand anything I wanted. She is off her head! They all are. By-the-way, did you hear of Madeleine Alcot's telegram to Worth?"

"No."

Kitty laughed—a laugh musical but malicious. Mrs. Alcot, married in the same month as herself, had been

The Marriage of William Ashe

her companion and rival from the beginning. They called each other "Kitty" and "Madeleine," and saw each other frequently; why, Lady Tranmore could never discover, unless on the principle that it is best to keep your enemy under observation.

"She telegraphed to Worth as soon as her invitation arrived, 'Envoyez tout de suite costume Vénus. Réponse.' The answer came at dinner—she had a dinner-party—and she read it aloud: 'Remercîments. Il n'y en a pas.' Isn't it delightful?"

"Very neat," said Lady Tranmore, smiling. "When did you invent that? You, I hear, are to be Diana?"

Kitty made a gesture of despair.

"Ask Fanchette—it depends on her. There is no one but she in London who can do it. Oh, by-the-way, what's Mary going to be? I suppose a Madonna of sorts."

"Not at all," said Lady Tranmore, dryly; "she has chosen a Sir Joshua costume I found for her."

"A vocation missed," said Kitty, shaking her head. "She ought to have been a 'Vestal Virgin' at least. . . . Do you know that you look *such* a duck this afternoon!" The speaker put up two small hands and pulled and patted at the black lace strings of Lady Tranmore's hat, which were tied under the delicately wrinkled white of her very distinguished chin.

"This hat suits you so—you are such a *grande dame* in it. Ah! Je t'adore!"

And Kitty softly took the chin aforesaid into her hands, and dropped a kiss on Lady Tranmore's cheek, which reddened a little under the sudden caress.

"Don't be a goose, Kitty." But Elizabeth Tranmore

The Marriage of William Ashe

stooped forward all the same and returned the kiss heartily. "Now tell me what you're going to wear at the Parhams'."

Kitty rose deliberately, went to the bell and rang it.

"It must be quite time for tea."

"You haven't answered my question, Kitty."

"Haven't I?" The butler entered. "Tea, please, Wilson, at once."

"Kitty!—"

Lady Kitty seated herself defiantly a short distance from her mother-in-law and crossed her hands on her lap.

"I am not going to the Parhams'."

"Kitty!—what do you mean?"

"I am not going to the Parhams'," repeated Kitty, slowly. "They should behave a little more considerately to me if they want to get me to amuse their guests for them."

At this moment Margaret French re-entered the room. Lady Tranmore turned to her with a gesture of distress.

"Oh, Margaret knows," said Kitty. "I told her yesterday."

"The Parhams?" said Margaret.

Kitty nodded. Margaret paused, with her hand on the back of Lady Tranmore's chair, and there was a short silence. Then Lady Tranmore began, in a tone that endeavored not to be too serious:

"I don't know how you're going to get out of it, my dear. Lady Parham has asked the Princess, first because she wished to come, secondly as an olive-branch to you. She has taken the greatest pains about the

The Marriage of William Ashe

dinner; and afterwards there is to be an evening party to hear you, just the right size, and just the right people."

"Cela m'est égal," said Kitty, "par-faite-ment égal! I am not going."

"What possible excuse can you invent?"

"I shall have a cold, the most atrocious cold imaginable. I take to my bed just two hours before it is time to dress. My letter reaches Lady Parham on the stroke of eight."

"Kitty, you would be doing a thing perfectly unheard of—most rude—most unkind!"

The stiff, slight figure, like a strained wand, did not waver for a moment before the grave indignation of the older woman.

"I should for once be paying off a score that has run on too long."

"You and Lady Parham had agreed to make friends, and let bygones be bygones."

"That was before last week."

"Before Lord Parham said—what annoyed you?"

Kitty's eyes flamed.

"Before Lord Parham humiliated me in public—or tried to."

"Dear Kitty, he was annoyed, and said a sharp thing; but he is an old man, and for William's sake, surely, you can forgive it. And Lady Parham had nothing to do with it."

"She has not written to me to apologize," said Kitty, with a most venomous calm. "Don't talk about it, mother. It will hurt you, and I am determined. Lady Parham has patronized or snubbed me ever since I

The Marriage of William Ashe

married—when she hasn't been setting my best friends against me. She is false, false, *false!*" Kitty struck her hands together with an emphatic gesture. "And Lord Parham said a thing to me last week I shall never forgive. Voilà! Now I mean to have done with it!"

"And you choose to forget altogether that Lord Parham is William's political chief—that William's affairs are in a critical state, and everything depends on Lord Parham—that it is not seemly, not possible, that William's wife should publicly slight Lady Parham, and through her the Prime Minister—at this moment of all moments."

Lady Tranmore breathed fast.

"William will not expect me to put up with insults," said Kitty, also beginning to show emotion.

"But can't you see that—just now especially—you ought to think of nothing—*nothing*—but William's future and William's career?"

"William will never purchase his career at my expense."

"Kitty, dear, listen," cried Lady Tranmore, in despair, and she threw herself into arguments and appeals to which Kitty listened quite unmoved for some twenty minutes. Margaret French, feeling herself an uncomfortable third, tried several times to steal away. In vain. Kitty's peremptory hand retained her. She could not escape, much as she wished it, from the wrestle between the two women—on the one side the mother, noble, already touched with age, full of dignity and protesting affection; on the other the wife, still little more than a child in years, vibrating through all her slender frame with passion and insolence, more beautiful than usual by

The Marriage of William Ashe

virtue of the very fire which possessed her—a manad at bay.

Lady Tranmore had just begun to waver in a final despair when the door opened and William Ashe entered.

He looked in astonishment at his mother and wife. Then in a flash he understood, and, with an involuntary gesture of fatigue, he turned to go.

"William!" cried his mother, hurrying after him, "don't go. Kitty and I were disputing; but it is nothing, dear! Don't go, you look so tired. Can you stay for dinner?"

"Well, that was my intention," said Ashe, with a smile, as he allowed himself to be brought back. "But Kitty seems in the clouds."

For Kitty had not moved an inch to greet him. She sat in a high-back chair, one foot crossed over the other, one hand supporting her cheek, looking straight before her with shining eyes.

Lady Tranmore laid a hand on her shoulder.

"We won't talk any more about it now, Kitty, will we?"

Kitty's pinched lips opened enough to emit the words:

"Perhaps William had better understand—"

"Goodness!" cried Ashe. "Is it the Parhams? Send them, Kitty, if you please, to ten thousand *diables*! You won't go to their dinner? Well, don't go! Please yourself—and hang the expense! Come and give me some dinner—there's a dear."

He bent over her and kissed her hair.

Lady Tranmore began to speak; then, with a mighty

The Marriage of William Ashe

effort, restrained herself and began to look for her parasol. Kitty did not move. Lady Tranmore said a muffled good-bye and went. And this time Margaret French insisted on going with her.

When Ashe returned to the drawing-room, he found his wife still in the same position, very pale and very wild.

"I have told your mother, William, what I intend to do about the Parhams."

"Very well, dear. Now she knows."

"She says it will ruin your career."

"Did she? We'll talk about that presently. We have had a nasty scene in the House with the Irishmen, and I'm famished. Go and change, there's a dear. Dinner's just coming in."

Kitty went reluctantly. She came down in a white, flowing garment, with a small green wreath in her hair, which, together with the air of a storm which still enveloped her, made her more mænad-like than ever. Ashe took no notice, gave her a laughing account of what had passed in the House, and ate his dinner.

Afterwards, when they were alone, and he was just about to return to the House, she made a swift rush across the dining-room, and caught his coat with both hands.

"William, I can't go to that dinner—it would kill me!"

"How you repeat yourself, darling!" he said, with a smile. "I suppose you'll give Lady Parham decent notice. What'll you do? Get a doctor's certificate and go away?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

Kitty panted. "Not at all. I shall not tell her till an hour before."

Ashe whistled.

"War? I see. Open war. Very well. Then we shall get to Venice for Easter."

Kitty fell back.

"What do you mean?"

"Very plain, isn't it? But what does it matter? Venice will be delightful, and there are plenty of good men to take my place."

"Lord Parham would pass you over?"

"Not at all. But I can't work in public with a man whom I must cut in private. It wouldn't amuse me. So if you're decided, Kitty, write to Danieli's for rooms."

He lit his cigarette, and went out with a perfect non-chalance and good-temper.

Kitty was to have gone to a ball. She countermanded her maid's preparations, and sent the maid to bed. In due time all the servants went to bed, the front door being left on the latch as usual for Ashe's late return. About midnight a little figure slipped into the child's nursery. The nurse was fast asleep. Kitty sat beside the child, motionless, for an hour, and when Ashe let himself into the house about two o'clock he heard a little rustle in the hall, and there stood Kitty, waiting for him.

"Kitty, what are you about?" he said, in pretended amazement. But in reality he was not astonished at all. His life for months past had been pitched in a key of extravagance and tumult. He had been practically certain that he should find Kitty in the hall.

With great tenderness he half led, half carried her



"KITTY SAT BESIDE THE CHILD, MOTIONLESS, FOR AN HOUR"



The Marriage of William Ashe

up-stairs. She clung to him as passionately as, before dinner, she had repulsed him. When they reached their room, the tired man, dropping with sleep, after a Parliamentary wrestle in which every faculty had been taxed to the utmost, took his wife in his arms; and there Kitty sobbed and talked herself into a peace of complete exhaustion. In this state she was one of the most exquisite of human beings, with words, tone, and gestures of a heavenly softness and languor. The evil spirit went out of her, and she was all ethereal tenderness, sadness, and remorse. For more than two years, scenes like this had, in Ashe's case, melted into final delight and intoxication which more than effaced the memory of what had gone before. Now for several months he had dreaded the issue of the crisis, no less than the crisis itself. It left him unnerved as though some morbid sirocco had passed over him.

When Kitty at last had fallen asleep, Ashe stood for some time beside his dressing-room window, looking absently into the cloudy night, too tired even to undress. A gusty northwest wind tore down the street and beat against the windows. The unrest without increased the tension of his mind and body. Like Lady Tranmore, he had, as it were, stepped back from his life, and was looking at it—the last three years of it in particular—as a whole. What was the net result of those years? Where was he? Whither were he and Kitty going? A strange pang shot through him. The mere asking of the question had been as the lifting of the lamp of Psyche.

The scene that night in the House of Commons had been for him a scene of conflict; in the main, also, of

The Marriage of William Ashe

victory. His virile powers, capacities, and ambitions had been at their height. He had felt the full spell of the English political life, with all its hard fighting joy, the exhilaration which flows from the vastness of the interests on which it turns, and the intricate appeal it makes, in the case of a man like himself, to a hundred inherited aptitudes, tastes, and traditions.

And here he stood in the darkness, wondering whether indeed the best of his life were not over—the prey of forebodings as strong and vagrant as the gusts outside.

Birds of the night! He forced himself to bed, and slept heavily. When he woke up, the May sun was shining into his room. Kitty, in the freshest of morning dresses, was sitting on his bed like a perching bird, waiting impatiently till his eyes should open and she could ask him his opinion on her dress for the ball. The savor and joy of life returned upon him in a flood. Kitty was the prettiest thing ever seen; he had scored off those Tory fellows the night before; the Parhams' dinner was all right; and life was once more kind, manageable, and full of the most agreeable possibilities. A certain indolent impatience in him recoiled from the mere recollection of the night before. The worry was over; why think of it again?

VIII

MEANWHILE Lady Tranmore had reached home, and after one of those pathetic hours in her husband's room which made the secret and sacred foundation of her daily life, she expected Mary Lyster, who was to dine at Tranmore House before the two ladies presented themselves at a musical party given by the French Ambassadors. Before her guest's arrival, Lady Tranmore wandered about her rooms, unable to rest, unable even to read the evening papers on Ashe's speech, so possessed was she still by her altercation with Kitty, and by the foreboding sense of what it meant. William's future was threatened; and the mother whose whole proud heart had been thrown for years into every successful effort and every upward step of her son, was up in arms.

Mary Lyster arrived to the minute. She came in, a tall gliding woman, her hair falling in rippled waves on either side of her face, which in its ample comeliness and placidity reminded the Italianate Lady Tranmore of many faces well known to her in early Siennese or Florentine art. Mary's dress to-night was of a noble red, and the glossy brown of her hair made a harmony both with her dress and with the whiteness of her neck that contented the fastidious eye of her companion. "Polly" was now thirty, in the prime of her good looks.

The Marriage of William Ashe

Lady Tranmore's affection for her, which had at one time even included the notion that she might possibly become William Ashe's wife, did not at all interfere with a shrewd understanding of her limitations. But she was daughterless herself; her family feeling was strong; and Mary's society was an old and pleasant habit one could ill have parted with. In her company, moreover, Mary was at her best.

Elizabeth Tranmore never discussed her daughter-in-law with her cousin. Loyalty to William forbade it, no less than a strong sense of family dignity. For Mary had spoken once—immediately after the engagement—with energy—nay, with passion; prophesying woe and calamity. Thenceforward it was tacitly agreed between them that all root-and-branch criticism of Kitty and her ways was taboo. Mary was, indeed, on apparently good terms with her cousin's wife. She dined occasionally at the Ashes', and she and Kitty met frequently under the wing of Lady Tranmore. There was no cordiality between them, and Kitty was often sharply or sulkily certain that Mary was to be counted among those hostile forces with which, in some of her moods, the world seemed to her to bristle. But if Mary kept, in truth, a very sharp tongue for many of her intimates on the subject of Kitty, Lady Tranmore at least was determined to know nothing about it.

On this particular evening, however, Lady Tranmore's self-control failed her, for the first time in three years. She had not talked five minutes with her guest before she perceived that Mary's mind was, in truth, brimful of gossip—the gossip of many drawing-rooms—as to Kitty's escapade with the Prince, Kitty's relations to Lady Par-

The Marriage of William Ashe

ham, Kitty's parties, and Kitty's whims. The temptation was too great; her own guard broke down.

"I hear Kitty is furious with the Parhams," said Mary, as the two ladies sat together after their rapid dinner. It was a rainy night, and the fire to which they had drawn up was welcome.

Lady Tranmore shook her head sadly.

"I don't know where it is to end," she said, slowly.

"Lady Parham told me yesterday—you don't mind my repeating it?"—Mary looked up with a smile—"she was still dreadfully afraid that Kitty would play her some trick about next Friday. She knows that Kitty detests her."

"Oh no," said Lady Tranmore, in a vague voice, "Kitty couldn't—impossible!"

Mary turned an observant eye upon her companion's conscious and troubled air, and drew conclusions not far from the truth.

"And it's all so awkward, isn't it?" she said, with sympathy, "when apparently Lady Parham is as much Prime Minister as he is."

For in those days certain great houses and political ladies, though not at the zenith of their power, were still, in their comparative decline, very much to be reckoned with. When Lady Parham talked longer than usual with the French Ambassador, his Austrian and German colleagues wrote anxious despatches to their governments; when a special mission to the East of great importance had to be arranged, nobody imagined that Lord Parham had very much to do with the appointment of the commissioner, who happened to have just engaged himself to Lady Parham's second girl. No young mem-

The Marriage of William Ashe

ber on the government side, if he wanted office, neglected Lady Parham's invitations, and admission to her more intimate dinners was still almost as much coveted as similar favors had been a generation before in the case of Lady Jersey, or still earlier, in that of Lady Holland. She was a small old woman, with a shrewish face, a waxen complexion, and a brown wig. In spite of short sight, she saw things that escaped most other people; her tongue was rarely at a loss; she was, on the whole, a good friend, though never an unreflecting one; and what she forgave might be safely reckoned as not worth resenting.

Elizabeth Tranmore received Mary's remark with reluctant consent. Lady Parham—from the English aristocratic stand-point—was not well-born. She had been the daughter of a fashionable music-master, whose blood was certainly not Christian. And there were many people beside Lady Tranmore who resented her domination.

"It will be so perfectly easy when the moment comes to invent some excuse or other for shelving William's claims," sighed Ashe's mother. "Nobody is indispensable, and if that old woman is provoked, she will be capable of any mischief."

"What do you want for William?" said Mary, smiling.

"He ought, of course, to have the Home Office!" replied Lady Tranmore, with fire.

Mary vowed that he would certainly have it. "Kitty is so clever, she will understand how important discretion is, before things go too far."

Lady Tranmore made no answer. She gazed into the fire, and Miss Lyster thought her depressed.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Has William ever interfered?" she asked, cautiously. Lady Tranmore hesitated.

"Not that I know of," she said, at last. "Nor will he ever—in the sense in which any ordinary husband would interfere."

"I know! It is as though he had a kind of superstition about it. Isn't there a fairy story, in which an elf marries a mortal on condition that if he ever ill-treats her, her people will fetch her back to fairyland? One day the husband lost his temper and spoke crossly; instantly there was a crash of thunder and the elf-wife vanished."

"I don't remember the story. But it's like that—exactly. He said to me once that he would never have asked her to marry him if he had not been able to make up his mind to let her have her own way—never to coerce her."

But having said this, Lady Tranmore repented. It seemed to her she had been betraying William's affairs. She drew her chair back from the fire, and rang to ask if the carriage had arrived. Mary took the hint. She arrayed herself in her cloak, and chatted agreeably about other things till the moment for their departure came.

As they drove through the streets, Lady Tranmore stole a glance at her companion.

"She is really very handsome," she thought—"much better-looking than she was at twenty. What are the men about, not to marry her?"

It was indeed a puzzle. For Mary was increasingly agreeable as the years went on, and had now quite a position of her own in London, as a charming woman

The Marriage of William Ashe

without angles or apparent egotisms; one of the initiated besides, whom any dinner-party might be glad to capture. Her relations, near and distant, held so many of the points of vantage in English public life that her word inevitably carried weight. She talked politics, as women of her class must talk them to hold their own; she supported the Church; and she was elegantly charitable, in that popular sense which means that you subscribe to your friends' charities without setting up any of your own. She was rich also—already in possession of a considerable fortune, inherited from her mother, and prospective heiress of at least as much again from her father, old Sir Richard Lyster, whose house in Somersetshire she managed to perfection. In the season she stayed with various friends, or with Lady Tranmore, Sir Richard being now infirm, and preferring the country. There was a younger sister, who was known to have married imprudently, and against her father's wishes, some five or six years before this. Catharine was poor, the wife of a clergyman with young children. Lady Tranmore sometimes wondered whether Mary was quite as good to her as she might be. She herself sent Catharine various presents in the course of the year for the children.

—Yes, it was certainly surprising that Mary had not married. Lady Tranmore's thoughts were running on this tack when of a sudden her eyes were caught by the placard of one of the evening papers.

"Interview with Mr. Cliffe. Peace assured." So ran one of the lines.

"Geoffrey Cliffe home again!" Lady Tranmore's tone betrayed a shade of contemptuous amusement.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"We shall have to get on without our daily telegram. Poor London!"

If at that moment it had occurred to her to look at her companion, she would have seen a quick reddening of Mary's cheeks.

"He has had a great success, though, with his telegrams!" replied Miss Lyster. "I should have thought one couldn't deny that."

"Success! Only with the people who don't matter," said Lady Tranmore, with a shrug. "Of what importance is it to anybody that Geoffrey Cliffe should telegraph his doings and his opinions every morning to the English public?"

We were in the midst of a disagreement with America. A whirlwind was unloosed, and as it happened Geoffrey Cliffe was riding it. For that gentleman had not succeeded in the designs which were occupying his mind when he had first made Kitty's acquaintance in the Grosvilles' country-house. He had desired an appointment in Egypt; but it had not been given him, and after some angry restlessness at home, he had once more taken up a pilgrim's staff and departed on fresh travels, bound this time for the Pamirs and Thibet. After nearly three years, during which he had never ceased, through the newspapers and periodicals, to keep his opinions and his personality before the public, he had been heard of in China, and as returning home by America. He arrived at San Francisco just as the dispute had broken out, was at once captured by an English paper, and sent to New York, with *carte blanche*. He had risen with alacrity to the situation. Thenceforward for some three weeks, England found a marvellous series of large-print tele-

The Marriage of William Ashe

grams, signed "Geoffrey Cliffe," awaiting her each morning on her breakfast-table.

"'The President and I met this morning'—'The President considers, and I agree with him'—'I told the President'—etc.—'The President this morning signed and sealed a memorable despatch. He said to me afterwards'"—etc.

Two diverse effects seemed to have been produced by these proceedings. A certain section of Radical opinion, which likes to see affairs managed *sans cérémonie*, and does not understand what the world wants with diplomatists when journalists are to be had, applauded; the old-fashioned laughed.

It was said that Cliffe was going into the House immediately; the young bloods of the party in power enjoyed the prospect, and had already stored up the *ego et Rex meus* details of his correspondence for future use.

"How could a man make such a fool of himself!" continued Lady Tranmore, the malice in her voice expressing not only the old aristocratic dislike of the press, but also the jealousy natural to the mother of an official son.

"Well, we shall see," said Mary, after a pause. "I don't quite agree with you, Cousin Elizabeth—indeed, I know there are many people who think that he has certainly done good."

Lady Tranmore turned in astonishment. She had expected Mary's assent to her original remark as a matter of course. Mary's old flirtation with Geoffrey Cliffe, and the long breach between them which had followed it, were things well known to her. They had coincided, moreover, with her own dropping of the man whom for

The Marriage of William Ashe

various reasons she had come to regard as unscrupulous and unsafe.

"Good!" she echoed—"good?"—with that boasting, and that *fanfaronnade*. Polly!"

But Miss Lyster held her ground.

"We must allow everybody their own ways of doing things, mustn't we? I am quite sure he has meant well—all through."

Lady Tranmore shrugged her shoulders. "Lord Parham told me he had had the most grotesque letters from him!—and meant henceforward to put them in the fire."

"Very foolish of Lord Parham," said Mary, promptly. "I should have thought that a Prime Minister would welcome information—from all sides. And of course Mr. Cliffe thinks that the government has been *very* badly served."

Lady Tranmore's wonder broke out. "You don't mean—that—you hear from him?"

She turned and looked full at her companion. Mary's color was still raised, but otherwise she betrayed no embarrassment.

"Yes, dear Cousin Elizabeth. I have heard from him regularly for the last six months. I have often wished to tell you, but I was afraid you might misunderstand me, and—my courage failed me!" The speaker, smiling, laid her hand on Lady Tranmore's. "The fact is, he wrote to me last autumn from Japan. You remember that poor cousin of mine who died at Tokio? Mr. Cliffe had seen something of him, and he very kindly wrote both to his mother and me afterwards. Then—"

"You didn't forgive him!" cried Lady Tranmore.

Mary laughed.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Was there anything to forgive? We were both young and foolish. Anyway, he interests me—and his letters are splendid."

"Did you ever tell William you were corresponding with him?"

"No, indeed! But I want very much to make them understand each other better. Why shouldn't the government make use of him? He doesn't wish at all to be thrown into the arms of the other side. But they treat him so badly—"

"My dear Mary! are we governed by the proper people, or are we not?"

"It is no good ignoring the press," said Mary, holding herself gracefully erect. "And the Bishop quite agrees with me."

Lady Tranmore sank back in her seat.

"You discussed it with the Bishop?" It was now some time since Mary had last brought the family Bishop—her cousin, and Lady Tranmore's—to bear upon an argument between them. But Elizabeth knew that his appearance in the conversation invariably meant a *fait accompli* of some sort.

"I read him some of Mr. Cliffe's letters," said Mary, modestly. "He thought them most remarkable."

"Even when he mocks at missionaries?"

"Oh! but he doesn't mock at them any more. He has learned wisdom—I assure you he has!"

Lady Tranmore's patience almost departed, Mary's look was so penetrated with indulgence for the prejudices of a dear but unreasonable relation. But she managed to preserve it.

"And you knew he was coming home?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Oh yes!" said Mary. "I meant to have told you at dinner. But something put it out of my head—Kitty, of course! I shouldn't wonder if he were at the embassy to-night."

"Polly! tell me—"—Lady Tranmore gripped Miss Lyster's hand with some force—"are you going to marry him?"

"Not that I know of," was the smiling reply. "Don't you think I'm old enough by now to have a man friend?"

"And you expect me to be civil to him!"

"Well, dear Cousin Elizabeth—you know—you never did break with him, quite."

Lady Tranmore, in her bewilderment, reflected that she had certainly meant to complete the process whenever she and Mr. Cliffe should meet again. Aloud she could only say, rather stiffly:

"I can't forget that William disapproves of him strongly."

"Oh no—excuse me—I don't think he does!" said Mary, quickly. "He said to me, the other day, that he should be very glad to pick his brains when he came home. And then he laughed and said he was a 'deuced clever fellow'—excuse the adjective—and it was a great thing to be 'as free as that chap was'—'without all sorts of boring colleagues and responsibilities.' Wasn't it like William?"

Lady Tranmore sighed.

"William shouldn't say those things."

"Of course, dear, he was only in fun. But I'll lay you a small wager, Cousin Elizabeth, that Kitty will ask Mr. Cliffe to lunch as soon as she knows he is in town."

Lady Tranmore turned away.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"I dare say. No one can answer for what Kitty will do. But Geoffrey Cliffe has said scandalous things of William."

"He won't say them again," said Mary, soothingly. "Besides, William never minds being abused a bit—does he?"

"He should mind," said Lady Tranmore, drawing herself up. "In my young days, our enemies were our enemies and our friends our friends. Nowadays nothing seems to matter. You may call a man a scoundrel one day and ask him to dinner the next. We seem to use words in a new sense—and I confess I don't like the change. Well, Mary, I sha'n't, of course, be rude to any friend of yours. But don't expect me to be effusive. And please remember that my acquaintance with Geoffrey Cliffe is older than yours."

Mary made a caressing reply, and gave her mind for the rest of the drive to the smoothing of Lady Tranmore's ruffled plumes. But it was not easy. As that lady made her way up the crowded staircase of the French Embassy, her fine face was still absent and a little stern.

Mary could only reflect that she had at least got through a first explanation which was bound to be made. Then for a few minutes her mind surrendered itself wholly to the question, "Will he be here?"

The rooms of the French Embassy were already crowded. An ambassador, short, stout, and somewhat morose, his plain features and snub nose emerging with difficulty from his thick, fair hair, superabundant beard, and mustache—with an elegant and smiling ambas-

The Marriage of William Ashe

sadress, personifying amid the English crowd that Paris from which through every fibre she felt herself a pining exile—received the guests. The scene was ablaze with uniforms, for the Speaker had been giving a dinner, and Royalty was expected. But, as Lady Tranmore perceived at once, very few members of the House of Commons were present. A hot debate on some detail of the naval estimates had been sprung on ministers, and the whips on each side had been peremptorily keeping their forces in hand.

"I don't see either William or Kitty," said Mary, after a careful scrutiny not, in truth, directed to the discovery of the Ashes.

"No. I suppose William was kept, and Kitty did not care to come alone."

Mary said nothing. But she was well aware that Kitty was never restrained from going into society by the mere absence of her husband. Meanwhile Lady Tranmore was lost in secret anxieties as to what might have happened in Hill Street. Had there been a quarrel? Something certainly had gone wrong, or Kitty would be here.

"Lady Kitty not arrived?" said a voice, like a macaw's, beside her.

Elizabeth turned and shook hands with Lady Parham. That extraordinary woman, followed everywhere by the attentive observation of the crowd, had never asserted herself more sharply in dress, manner, and coiffure than on this particular evening—so it seemed, at least, to Lady Tranmore. Her ample figure was robed in the white satin of a bride, her wrinkled neck disappeared under a weight of jewels, and her bright chestnut wig, to which

The Marriage of William Ashe

the diamond tiara was fastened, positively attacked the spectator, so patent was it and unashamed. Unashamed, too, were the bold, tyrannous eyes, the rouge-spots on either cheek, the strength of the jaw, the close-shut ability of the mouth. Elizabeth Tranmore looked at her with a secret passion of dislike. Her English pride of race, no less than the prejudices of her taste and training, could hardly endure the fact that, for William's sake, she must make herself agreeable to Lady Parham.

Agreeable, however, she tried to be. Kitty had seemed to her tired in the afternoon, and had, no doubt, gone to bed—so she averred.

Lady Parham laughed.

"Well, she mustn't be tired the night of my party next week—or the skies will fall. I never took so much trouble before about anything in my life."

"No, she must take care," said Lady Tranmore. "Unfortunately, she is not strong, and she does too much."

Lady Parham threw her a sharp look.

"Not strong? I should have thought Lady Kitty was made on wires. Well, if she fails me, I shall go to bed—with small-pox. There will be nothing else to be done. The Princess has actually put off another engagement to come—she has heard so much of Lady Kitty's reciting. But you'll help me through, won't you?"

And the wrinkled face and harsh lips fell into a contortion meant for a confidential smile; while through it all the eyes, wholly independent, studied the face beside her—closely, suspiciously—until the owner of it in her discomfort could almost have repeated aloud the words that were ringing in her mind—"I shall *not* go to Lady

The Marriage of William Ashe

Parham's! My note will reach her on the stroke of eight."

"Certainly—I will keep an eye on her!" she said, lightly. "But you know—since her illness—"

"Oh no!" said Lady Parham, impatiently, "she is very well—very well indeed. I never saw her look so radiant. By-the-way, did you hear your son's speech the other night? I did not see you in the gallery. A great pity if you missed it. It was admirable."

Lady Tranmore replied regretfully that she had not been there, and that she had not been able to have a word with him about it since.

"Oh, he knows he did well," said Lady Parham, carelessly. "They all do. Lord Parham was delighted. He could do nothing but talk about it at dinner. He says they were in a very tight place, and Mr. Ashe got them out."

Lady Tranmore expressed her gratification with all the dignity she could command, conscious meanwhile that her companion was not listening to a word, absorbed as she was in a hawklike examination of the room through a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses.

Suddenly the eye-glasses fell with a rattle.

"Good Heavens!" cried Lady Parham. "Do you see who that is talking to Mr. Loraine?"

Lady Tranmore looked, and at once perceived Geoffrey Cliffe in close conversation with the leader of the Opposition. The lady beside her gave an angry laugh.

"If Mr. Cliffe thinks he has done himself any good by these ridiculous telegrams of his, he will find himself mistaken! People are perfectly furious about them."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Naturally," said Lady Tranmore. "Only that it is a pity to take him seriously."

"Oh, I don't know. He has his following; unfortunately, some of our own men are inclined to think that Parham should conciliate him. Ignore him, I say. Behave as though he didn't exist. Ah! by-the-way"—the speaker raised herself on tiptoe, and said, in an audacious undertone—"is it true that he may possibly marry your cousin, Miss Lyster?"

Lady Tranmore kept a smiling composure. "Is it true that Lord Parham may possibly give him an appointment?"

Lady Parham turned away in annoyance. "Is that one of the inventions going about?"

"There are so many," said Lady Tranmore.

At that moment, however, to her infinite relief, her companion abruptly deserted her. She was free to observe the two distant figures in conversation—Geoffrey Cliffe and Mr. Loraine, the latter a man now verging on old age, white-haired and wrinkled, but breathing still through every feature and every movement the scarcely diminished energy of his magnificent prime. He stood with bent head, listening attentively, but, as Lady Tranmore thought, coldly, to the arguments that Cliffe was pouring out upon him. Once he looked up in a sudden recoil, and there was a flash from an eye famous for its power of majestic or passionate rebuke. Cliffe, however, took no notice, and talked on, Loraine still listening.

"Look at them!" said Lady Parham, venomously, in the ear of one of her intimates. "We shall have all this out in the House to-morrow. The Opposition mean to

The Marriage of William Ashe

play that man for all he's worth. Mr. Loraine, too—with his puritanical ways! I know what he thinks of Cliffe. He wouldn't *touch* him in private. But in public—you'll see—he'll swallow him whole—just to annoy Parham. There's your politician."

And stiff with the angry virtue of the "ins," denouncing the faction of the "outs," Lady Parham passed on.

Elizabeth Tranmore meanwhile turned to look for Mary Lyster. She found her close behind, engaged in a perfunctory conversation, which evidently left her quite free to follow things more exciting. She, too, was watching; and presently it seemed to Lady Tranmore that her eyes met with those of Cliffe. Cliffe paused; abruptly lost the thread of his conversation with Mr. Loraine, and began to make his way through the crowded room. Lady Tranmore watched his progress with some attention. It was the progress, clearly, of a man much in the eye and mouth of the public. Whether the atmosphere surrounding him in these rooms was more hostile or more favorable, Lady Tranmore could not be quite sure. Certainly the women smiled upon him; and his strange face, thinner, browner, more weather-beaten and life-beaten than ever, under its crest of grizzling hair, had the old arrogant and picturesque power, but, as it seemed to her, with something added—something subtler, was it, more romantic than of yore? which arrested the spectator. Had he really been in love with that French woman? Lady Tranmore had heard it rumored that she was dead.

It was not towards Mary Lyster, primarily, that he was moving, Elizabeth soon discovered; it was towards herself. She braced herself for the encounter.

The Marriage of William Ashe

The greeting was soon over. After she herself had said the appropriate things, Lady Tranmore had time to notice that Mary Lyster, whose turn came next, did not attempt to say them. She looked, indeed, unusually handsome and animated; Lady Tranmore was certain that Cliffe had noticed as much, at his first sight of her. But the remarks she omitted showed how minute and recent was their knowledge of each other's movements. Cliffe himself gave a first impression of high spirits. He declared that London was more agreeable than he had ever known it, and that after his three years' absence nobody looked a day older. Then he inquired after Ashe.

Lady Tranmore replied that William was well, but hard-worked; she hoped to persuade him to get a few days abroad at Whitsuntide. Her manner was quiet, without a trace of either discourtesy or effusion. Cliffe began to twist his mustache, a sign she knew well. It meant that he was in truth both irritable and nervous.

"You think they'll last till Whitsuntide?"

"The government?" she said, smiling. "Certainly—and beyond."

"I give them three weeks," said Cliffe, twisting anew, with a vigor that gave her a positive physical sympathy with the tortured mustache. "There will be some papers out to-morrow that will be a bomb-shell."

"About America? Oh, they have been blown up so often! You, for instance, have been doing your best—for months."

His perfunctory laugh answered the mockery of her charming eyes.

"Well—I wish I could make William hear reason."

The Marriage of William Ashe

Lady Tranmore held herself stiffly. The Christian name seemed to her an offence. It was true that in old days he and Cliffe had been on those terms. Now—it was a piece of bad taste.

“Probably what is reason to you is folly to him,” she said, dryly.

“No, no!—he *knows*,” said Cliffe, with impatience. “The others don’t. Parham is more impossible—more crassly, grossly ignorant!” He lifted hands and eyes in protest. “But Ashe, of course, is another matter altogether.”

“Well, go and see him—go and talk to him!” said Lady Tranmore, still mocking. “There are no lions in the way.”

“None,” said Cliffe. “As a matter of fact, Lady Kitty has asked me to luncheon. But does one find Ashe himself in the middle of the day?”

At the mention of her daughter-in-law Elizabeth made an involuntary movement. Mary, standing beside her, turned towards her and smiled.

“Not often.” The tone was cold. “But you could always find him at the House.” And Lady Tranmore moved away.

“Is there a quiet corner anywhere?” said Cliffe to Mary. “I have such heaps to tell you.”

So while some Polish gentleman in the main drawing-room, whose name ended in *ski*, challenged his violin to the impossible, Cliffe and Mary retired from observation into a small room thrown open with the rest of the suite, which was in truth the morning-room of the ambassadress.

As soon as they found themselves alone, there was

The Marriage of William Ashe

a pause in their conversation; each involuntarily looked at the other. Mary certainly recognized that these years of absence had wrought a noticeable change in the man before her. He had aged. Hard living and hard travelling had left their marks. But, like Lady Tranmore, she also perceived another difference. The eyes bent upon her were indeed, as before, the eyes of a man self-centred, self-absorbed. There was no chivalrous softness in them, no consideration. The man who owned them used them entirely for his own purposes; they betrayed none of that changing instinctive relation towards the human being—any human being—within their range, which makes the charm of so many faces. But they were sadder, more sombre, more restless; they thrilled her more than they had already thrilled her once, in the first moment of her youth.

What was he going to say? From the moment of his first letter to her from Japan, Mary had perfectly understood that he had some fresh purpose in his mind. She was not anxious, however, to precipitate the moment of explanation. She was no longer the young girl whose equilibrium is upset by the mere approach of the man who interests her. Moreover, there was a past between herself and Cliffe, the memory of which might indeed point her to caution. Did he now, after all, want to marry her—because she was rich, and he was comparatively poor, and could only secure an English career at the cost of a well-stored wife? Well, all that should be thought over; by herself no less than by him. Meanwhile her vanity glowed within her, as she thus held him there, alone, to the discomfiture of other women more beautiful and more highly placed than herself; as she

The Marriage of William Ashe

remembered his letters in her desk at home; and the secrets she imagined him to have told her. Then again she felt a rush of sudden disquiet, caused by this new aspect—wavering and remote—as though some hidden grief emerged and vanished. He had the haggard air of a man who scarcely sleeps. All that she had ever heard of the French affair rushed through her mind, stirring there an angry curiosity.

These impressions took, however, but a few minutes, while they exchanged some conventionalities. Then Cliffe said, scrutinizing the face and form beside him with that intentness which, from him, was more generally taken as compliment than offence:

“Will you excuse the remark? There are no women who keep their first freshness like Englishwomen.”

“Thank you. If we feel fresh, I suppose we look it. As for you, you clearly want a rest.”

“No time to think of it, then; I have come home to fight—all I know; to make myself as odious as possible.”

Mary laughed.

“You have been doing that so long. Why not try the opposite?”

Cliffe looked at her sharply.

“You think I have made a failure of it?”

“Not at all. You have made everybody furiously uncomfortable, and you see how civil even the Radical papers are to you.”

“Yes. What fools!” said Cliffe, shortly. “They’ll soon leave that off. Just now I’m a stick to beat the government with. But you don’t believe I shall carry my point?”

The point concerned a particular detail in a pending

The Marriage of William Ashe

negotiation with the United States. Cliffe had been denouncing the government for what he conceived to be their coming retreat before American demands. America, according to him, had been playing the bully; and English interests were being betrayed.

Mary considered.

"I think you will have to change your tactics."

"Dictate them, then."

He bent forward, with that sudden change of manner, that courteous sweetness of tone and gesture, which few women could resist. Mary's heart, seasoned though it were, felt a charming flutter. She talked, and she talked well. She had no independence of mind, and very little real knowledge; but she had an excellent reporter's ability; she knew what to remember, and how to tell it. Cliffe listened to her attentively, acknowledging to himself the while that she had certainly gained. She was a far more definite personality than she had been when he last knew her; and her self-possession, her trained manner, rested him. Thank Heaven, she was not a clever woman—how he detested the breed! But she was a useful one. And the smiling commonplace into which she fell so often was positively welcome to him. He had known what it was to court a woman who was more than his equal both in mind and passion; and it had left him bitter and broken.

"Well, all this is most illuminating," he said at last. "I owe you immense thanks." And he put out a pair of hands, thin, brown, and weather-stained as his face, and pressed one of hers. "We're very old friends, aren't we?"

"Are we?" said Mary, drawing back.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"So far as any one can be the friend of a chap like me," he said, hastily. "Tell me, are you with Lady Tranmore?"

"No. I go to her in a few days—till I leave London."

"Don't go away," he said, suddenly and insistently. "Don't go away."

Mary could not help a slight wavering in the eyes that perforce met his. Then he said, abruptly, as she rose:

"By-the-way, they tell me Ashe is a great man."

She caught the note of incredulous contempt in his voice and laughed.

"They say he'll be in the cabinet directly."

"And Lady Kitty, I understand, is a scandal to gods and men, and the most fashionable person in town?"

"Oh, not now," said Mary. "That was last year."

"You mean people are tired of her?"

"Well, after a time, you know, a naughty child—"

"Becomes a bore. Is she a bore? I doubt; I very much doubt."

"Go and see," said Mary. "When do you lunch there?"

"I think to-morrow. Shall I find you?"

"Oh no. I am not at all intimate with Lady Kitty."

Cliffe's slight smile, as he followed her into the large drawing-room, died under his mustache. He divined at once the relation between the two, or thought he did.

As for Mary, she caught her last sight of Cliffe, standing bareheaded on the steps of the embassy, his lean distinction, his ugly good looks marking him out from the men around him. Then, as they drove away she was

The Marriage of William Ashe

glad that the darkness hid her from Lady Tranmore. For suddenly she could not smile. She was filled with the perception that if Geoffrey Cliffe did not now ask her to marry him, life would utterly lose its savor, its carefully cherished and augmented savor, and youth would abandon her. At the same time she realized that she would have to make a fight of it, with every weapon she could muster.

IX

“**W**ASN'T I expected?” said Darrell, with a chilly smile.

“Oh yes, sir—yes, sir!” said the Ashes’ butler, as he looked distractedly round the drawing-room. “I believe her ladyship will be in directly. Will you kindly take a seat?”

The man’s air of resignation convinced Darrell that Lady Kitty had probably gone out without any orders to her servants, and had now forgotten all about her luncheon-party—a state of things to which the Hill Street household was, no doubt, well accustomed.

“I shall claim some lunch,” he thought to himself, “whatever happens. These young people want keeping in their place. Ah!”

For he had observed, placed on a small easel, the print of Madame de Longueville in costume, and he put up his eye-glass to look at it. He guessed at once that its appearance there was connected with the fancy ball which was now filling London with its fame, and he examined it with some closeness. “Lady Kitty will make a stir in it—no doubt of that!” he said to himself, as he turned away. “She has the keenest *flair* of them all for what produces an effect. None of the others can touch her—Mrs. Alcot—none of them!”

He was thinking of the other members of a certain

The Marriage of William Ashe

group, at that time well known in London society—a group characterized chiefly by the beauty, extravagance, and audacity of the women belonging to it. It was by no means a group of mere fashionables. It contained a large amount of ability and accomplishment; some men of aristocratic family, who were also men of high character, with great futures before them; some persons from the literary or artistic world, who possessed, besides their literary or artistic gifts, a certain art of agreeable living, and some few others—especially young girls—admitted generally for some peculiar quality of beauty or manner outside the ordinary canons. Money was really presupposed by the group as a group. The life they belonged to was a life of the rich, the houses they met in were rich houses. But money as such had no power whatever to buy admission to their ranks; and the members of the group were at least as impatient of the claims of mere wealth as they were of those of mere virtue.

On the whole the group was an element of ferment and growth in the society that had produced it. Its impatience of convention and restraint, the exaltation of intellectual or artistic power which prevailed in it, and even the angry opposition excited by its pretensions and its exclusiveness, were all, perhaps, rather profitable than harmful at that moment of our social history. Old customs were much shaken; the new were shaping themselves, and this daring coterie of young and brilliant people, living in one another's houses, calling one another by their Christian names, setting a number of social rules at defiance, discussing books, making the fame of artists, and, now and then, influencing politics, were certainly

The Marriage of William Ashe

helping to bring the new world to birth. Their foes called them "The Archangels," and they themselves had accepted the name with complacency.

Kitty, of course, was an Archangel, so was Mrs. Alcot. Cliffe had belonged to them before his travels began. Louis Harman was more or less of their tribe, and Lady Tranmore, though not herself an Archangel, entertained the set in London and in the country. Like various older women connected with the group, she was not of them, but she "harbored" them.

Darrell was well aware that he did not belong to them, though personally he was acquainted with almost all the members of the group. He was not completely indifferent to his exclusion; and this fact annoyed him more than the exclusion itself.

He had scarcely finished his inspection of the print when the door again opened and Geoffrey Cliffe entered. Darrell had not yet seen him since his return and since his attack on the government had made him the hero of the hour. Of the newspaper success Darrell was no less jealous and contemptuous than Lady Tranmore, though for quite other reasons. But he knew better than she the intellectual quality of the man, and his disdain for the journalist was tempered by his considerable though reluctant respect for the man of letters.

They greeted each other coolly, while Cliffe, not seeing his hostess, looked round him with annoyance.

"Well, we shall probably entertain each other," said Darrell, as they sat down. "Lady Kitty often forgets her engagements."

"Does she?" said Cliffe, coldly, pretending to glance through a book beside him. It touched his vanity that

The Marriage of William Ashe

his hostess was not present, and still more that Darrell should suppose him a person to be forgotten. Darrell, however, who had no mind for any discomfort that might be avoided, made a few dexterous advances, Cliffe's brow relaxed, and they were soon in conversation.

The position of the ministry naturally presented itself as a topic. Two or three retirements were impending, the whole position was precarious. Would the cabinet be reconstructed without a dissolution, or must there be an appeal to the country?

Cliffe was passionately in favor of the latter course. The party fortunes could not possibly be retrieved without a general shuffling of the cards, and an opportunity for some wholly fresh combination involving new blood.

"In any case," said Cliffe, "I suppose our friend here is sure of one or other of the big posts?"

"William Ashe? Oh, I suppose so, unless some intrigue gets in the way." Darrell dropped his voice. "Parham doesn't, in truth, hit it off with him very well. Ashe is too clever, and Parham doesn't understand his paradoxes."

"Also I gather," said Cliffe, with a smile, "that Lady Parham has her say?"

Darrell shrugged his shoulders.

"It sounds incredible that one should still have to reckon with that kind of thing at this time of day. But I dare say it's true."

"However, I imagine Lady Kitty—by-the-way, how much longer shall we give her?"—Cliffe looked at his watch with a frown—"may be trusted to take care of that."

Darrell merely raised his eyebrows, without replying.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"What, not a match for one Lady Parham?" said Cliffe, with a laugh. "I should have thought—from my old recollections of her—she would have been a match for twenty?"

"Oh, if she cared to try."

"She is not ambitious?"

"Certainly; but not always for the same thing."

"She is trying to run too many horses abreast?"

"Oh, I am not a great friend," said Darrell, smiling. "I should never dream of analyzing Lady Kitty. Ah!"—he turned his head—"are we not forgotten, or just remembered—which?"

For a rapid step approached, the door opened, and a lady appeared on the threshold. It was not Kitty, however. The new-comer advanced, putting up a pair of fashionable eye-glasses, and looking at the two men in a kind of languid perplexity, intended, as Darrell immediately said to himself, merely to prolong the moment and the effect of her entry. Mrs. Alcot was very tall, and inordinately thin. Her dark head on its slim throat, the poetic lines of the brow, her half-shut eyes, the gleam of her white teeth, and all the delicate detail of her dress, and, one might even say, of her manner, gave an impression of beauty, though she was not, in truth, beautiful. But she had grace and she had daring—the two essential qualities of an Archangel; she was also a remarkable artist, and no small critic.

"Mr. Cliffe," she said, with a start of what was evidently agreeable surprise, "Kitty never told me. When did you come?"

"I arrived a few days ago. Why weren't you at the embassy last night?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Because I was much better employed. I have given up crushes. But I would have come—to meet you. Ah, Mr. Darrell!" she added, in another tone, holding out an indifferent hand. "Where is Kitty?" She looked round her.

"Shall we order lunch?" said Darrell, who had given her a greeting as careless as her own.

"Kitty is really too bad; she is never less than an hour late," said Mrs. Alcot, seating herself. "Last time she dined with us I asked her for seven-thirty. She thought something very special must be happening, and arrived—breathless—at half-past eight. Then she was furious with me because she was not the last. But one can't do it twice. Well"—addressing herself to Cliffe—"are you come home to stay?"

"That depends," said Cliffe, "on whether England makes itself agreeable to me."

"What are your deserts? Why should England be agreeable to you?" she replied, with a smiling sharpness. "You do nothing but croak about England."

Thus challenged, Cliffe sat down beside her and they fell into a bantering conversation. Darrell, though inwardly wounded by the small trouble they took to include him, let nothing appear, put in a word now and then, or turned over the pages of the illustrated books.

After five minutes a fresh guest arrived. In walked the little Dean, Dr. Winston, who had originally made acquaintance with Lady Kitty at Grosville Park. He came in overflowing with spirits and enthusiasm. He had been spending the morning in Westminster Abbey with another Dean more famous though not more charming than himself, and with yet another congenial

The Marriage of William Ashe

spirit, one of the younger historians, all of them passionate lovers of the rich human detail of the past, the actual men and women, kings, queens, bishops, executioners, and all the shreds and tatters that remained of them. Together they had opened a royal tomb, and the Dean's eyes were sparkling as though the ghost of the queen whose ashes he had been handling still walked and talked with him.

He passed in his light, disinterested way through most sections of English society, though the slave of none; and he greeted Darrell and Mrs. Alcot as acquaintances. Mrs. Alcot introduced Cliffe to him, and the small Dean bowed rather stiffly. He was a supporter of the government, and he thought Cliffe's campaign against them vulgar and unfair.

"Is there no hope of Lady Kitty?" he said to Mrs. Alcot.

"Not much. Shall we go down to lunch?"

"Without our hostess?" The Dean opened his eyes.

"Oh, Kitty expects it," said Mrs. Alcot, with affected resignation, "and the servants are quite prepared. Kitty asks everybody to lunch—then somebody asks her—and she forgets. It's quite simple."

"Quite," said Cliffe, buttoning up his coat, "but I think I shall go to the club."

He was looking for his hat, when again there was a commotion on the stairs—a high voice giving orders—and in burst Kitty. She stood still as soon as she saw her guests, talking so fast and pouring out such a flood of excuses that no one could get in a word. Then she flew to each guest in turn, taking them by both hands—Darrell only excepted—and showing herself so penitent,

The Marriage of William Ashe

amusing, and charming that everybody was propitiated. It was Fanchette, of course—Fanchette the criminal, the incomparable. Her dress for the ball. Kitty raised eyes and hands to heaven—it would be a marvel, a miracle. Unless, indeed, she were lying cold and quiet in her little grave before the time came to wear it. But Fanchette's tempers—Fanchette's caprices—no! Kitty began to mimic the great dressmaker torn to pieces by the crowd of fashionable ladies, stopping abruptly in the middle to say to Cliffe:

"You were going away? I saw you take up your hat."

"I despaired of my hostess," said Cliffe, with a smile. Then as he perceived that Mrs. Alcot had taken up the theme and was holding the others in play, he added in a lower voice, "and I was in no mood for second-best."

Kitty's eyes twinkled a moment as she turned them on Madeleine Alcot.

"Ah, I remember—at Grosville Park—what a bad temper you had. You would have gone away furious."

"With disappointment—yes," said Cliffe, as he looked at her with an admiration he scarcely endeavored to conceal. Kitty was in black, but a large hat of white tulle, in the most extravagant fashion of the day, made a frame for her hair and eyes, and increased the general lightness and fantasy of her appearance. Cliffe tried to recall her as he had first seen her at Grosville Park, but his recollection of the young girl could not hold its own against the brilliant and emphatic reality before him.

At luncheon it chafed him that he must divide her with the Dean. Yet she was charming with the old man, who chatted history, art, and Paris to her, with a delight-

The Marriage of William Ashe

ful innocence and ignorance of all that made Lady Kitty Ashe the talk of the town, and an old-fashioned deference besides, that insensibly curbed her manner and her phrases as she answered him. Yet when the Dean left her free she returned to Cliffe, as though in some sort they two had really been talking all the time, through all the apparent conversation with other people.

"I have read all your telegrams," she said. "Why did you attack William so fiercely?"

Cliffe was taken by surprise, but he felt no embarrassment—her tone was not that of the wife in arms.

"I attacked the official—not the man. William knows that."

"He is coming in to-day if possible. He wanted to see you."

"Good news! William knows that he would have hit just as hard in my place."

"I don't think he would," said Kitty, calmly. "He is so generous."

The color rushed to Cliffe's face.

"Well scored! I wish I had a wife to play these strokes for me. I shall argue that a keen politician has no right to be generous. He is at war."

Kitty took no notice. She leaned her little chin on her hand, and her eyes perused the face of her companion.

"Where have you been—all the time—before America?"

"In the deserts—fighting devils," said Cliffe, after a moment.

"What does that mean?" she asked, wondering.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Read my new book. That will tell you about the deserts."

"And the devils?"

"Ah, I keep them to myself."

"Do you?" she said, softly. "I have just read your poems over again."

Cliffe gave a slight start, then looked indifferent.

"Have you? But they were written three years ago. Dieu merci, one finds new devils like new acquaintances."

She shook her head.

"What do you mean?" he asked her, half amused, half arrested.

"They are always the old," she said, in a low voice. Their eyes met. In hers was the same veiled, restless melancholy as in his own. Together with the dazzling air of youth that surrounded her, the cherished, flattered, luxurious existence that she and her house suggested, they made a strange impression upon him. "Does she mean me to understand that she is not happy?" he thought to himself. But the next moment she was engaged in a merry chatter with the Dean, and all trace of the mood she had thus momentarily shown him had vanished.

Half-way through the luncheon, Ashe came in. He appeared, fresh and smiling, irreproachably dressed, and showing no trace whatever of the hard morning of official work he had just passed through, nor of the many embarrassments which, as every one knew, were weighing on the Foreign Office. The Dean, with his keen sense for the dramatic, watched the meeting between him and Cliffe with some closeness, having in mind the almost personal duel between the two men—a duel of

The Marriage of William Ashe

letters, telegrams, or speeches, which had been lately carried on in the sight of Europe and America. For Ashe now represented the Foreign Office in the House of Commons, and had been much badgered by the Tory extremists who followed Cliffe.

Naturally, being Englishmen, they met as though nothing had happened and they had parted the day before in Pall Mall. A "Hullo, Ashel" and "Hullo, Cliffe! glad to see you back again," completed the matter. The Dean enjoyed it as a specimen of English "phlegm," recalling with amusement his last visit to the Paris of the Second Empire—Paris torn between government and opposition, the *salons* of the one divided from the *salons* of the other by a sulphurous gulf, unless when some Lazarus of the moment, some well-known novelist or poet, cradled in the Abraham's bosom of Liberalism, passed amid shrieks of triumph or howls of treason into the official inferno.

Not that there was any avoiding of topics in this English case. Ashe had no sooner slipped into his seat than he began to banter Cliffe upon a letter of a supporter which had appeared in that morning's *Times*. It was written by Lord S., who had played the part of public "fool" for half a generation. To be praised by him was disaster, and Cliffe's flush showed at once that the letter had caused him acute annoyance. He and Ashe fell upon the writer, vying with each other in anecdotes that left him presently close-plucked and bare.

"That's all very well," said Kitty, amid the laughter which greeted the last tale, "but he never told *you* how he proposed to the second Lady S."

The Marriage of William Ashe

And lifting a red strawberry, which she held poised against her red, laughing lips, she waited a moment—looking round her. "Go on, Kitty," said Ashe, approvingly; "go on."

Thus permitted, Kitty gave one of the little "scenes," arranged from some experience of her own, which were very famous among her intimates. Ashe called them her "parlor tricks," and was never tired of making her exhibit them. And now, just as at Grosville Park, she held her audience. She spoke without a halt, her small features answering perfectly to every impulse of her talent, each touch of character or dialogue as telling as a malicious sense of comedy could make it; arms, hands, shoulders all aiding in the final result—a table swept by a very storm of laughter, in the midst of which Kitty quietly finished her strawberry.

"Well done, Kitty!" Ashe, who sat opposite to her, stretched his hand across, and patted hers.

"Does she love him?" Cliffe asked himself, and could not make up his mind, closely as he tried to observe their relations. He was more and more conscious of the exciting effect she produced on himself, doubly so, indeed, because of that sudden stroke of melancholy wherewith—like a Rembrandt shadow, she had thrown into relief the gayety and frivolity of her ordinary mood.

The stimulus, whatever it was, played upon his vanity. He, too, sought an opening and found it. Soon it was he who was monopolizing the conversation with an account of two days spent with Bismarck in a Prussian country-house, during the triumphant days of the winter which followed on Sadowa. The story was brilliantly told, and of some political importance. But it was disfigured by

The Marriage of William Ashe

arrogance and affectation, and Ashe's eyes began to dance a little. Cliffe meanwhile could not forget that he was in the presence of a rival and an official, could not refrain after a while from a note of challenge here and there. The conversation diverged from the tale into matters of current foreign politics. Ashe, lounging and smoking, at first knew nothing, had heard of nothing, as usual. Then a comment or correction dropped out; Cliffe repeated himself vehemently—only to provoke another. Presently, no one knew how, the two men were measured against each other *corps à corps*—the wide knowledge and trained experience of the minister against the originality, the force, the fantastic imagination of the writer.

The Dean watched it with delight. He was very fond of Ashe, and liked to see him getting the better of "the newspaper fellow." Kitty's lovely brown eyes travelled from one to the other. Now it seemed to the Dean that she was proud of Ashe, now that she sympathized with Cliffe. Soon, however, like the god at Philippi, she swept upon the poet and bore him from the field.

"Not a word more politics!" she said, peremptorily, to Ashe, holding up her hand. "I want to talk to Mr. Cliffe about the ball."

Cliffe was not very ready to obey. He had an angry sense of having been somehow shown to disadvantage, and would like to have challenged his host again. But Kitty poured balm into his wounds. She drew him apart a little, using the play of her beautiful eyes for him only, and talking to him in a new voice of deference.

"You're going, of course? Lady M. told me the other day she *must* have you."

The Marriage of William Ashe

Cliffe, still a little morose, replied that his invitation had been waiting for him at his London rooms. He gave the information carelessly, as though it did not matter to him a straw. In reality, as soon as, while still in America, he had seen the announcement of the ball in one of the New York papers, he had written at once to the Marchioness who was to give it—an old acquaintance of his—practically demanding an invitation. It had been sent indeed with alacrity, and without waiting for its arrival Cliffe had ordered his dress in Paris. Kitty inquired what it was to be.

"I told my man to copy a portrait of Alva."

"Ah, that's right," said Kitty, nodding—"that's right. Only it would have been better if it had been Torquemada."

Rather nettled, Cliffe asked what there might be about him that so forcibly suggested the Grand Inquisitor. Kitty, cigarette in hand, with half-shut eyes, did not answer immediately. She seemed to be perusing his face with difficulty.

"Strength, I suppose," she said at last, slowly. Cliffe waited, then burst into a laugh.

"And cruelty?" She nodded.

"Who are my victims?"

She said nothing.

"Whose tales have you been listening to, Lady Kitty?"

She mentioned the name of a French lady. Cliffe changed countenance.

"Ah, well, if you have been talking to her," he said, haughtily, "you may well expect to see me appear as Diabolus in person."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"No. But it's since then that I've read the poems again. You see, you tell the public so much—"

"That you think you have the right to guess the rest?" He paused, then added, with impatience, "Don't guess, Lady Kitty. You have everything that life can give you. Let my secrets alone."

There was silence. Kitty looking round her saw that Madeleine Alcot was entertaining her other guests, and that she and Cliffe were unobserved. Suddenly Cliffe bent towards her, and said, with roughness, his face struggling to conceal the feeling behind it:

"You heard—and you believed—that I tormented her—that I killed her?"

The anguish in his eyes seemed to strike a certain answering fire from Kitty's.

"Yes, but—"

"But what?"

"I didn't think it very strange—"

Cliffe watched her closely.

"—that a man should be—an inhuman beast—if he were jealous—and desperate. You can sympathize with these things?"

She drew a long breath, and threw away the cigarette she had been holding suspended in her small fingers.

"I don't know anything about them."

"Because," he hesitated, "your own life has been so happy?"

She evaded him. "Don't you think that jealousy will soon be as dead as—saying your prayers and going to church? I never meet anybody that cares enough—to be jealous."

She spoke first with passionate force, then with con-

The Marriage of William Ashe

tempt, glancing across the room at Madeleine Alcot. Cliffe saw the look, and remembered that Mrs. Alcot's husband, a distinguished treasury official, had been for years the intimate friend of a very noble and beautiful woman, herself unhappily married. There was no scandal in the matter, though much talk. Mrs. Alcot meanwhile had her own affairs; her husband and she were apparently on friendly terms; only neither ever spoke of the other; and their relations remained a mystery.

Cliffe bent over to Kitty.

"And yet you said you could understand?—such things didn't seem strange to you."

She gave a little, reckless laugh.

"Did I? It's like the people who think they could act or sing, if they only had the chance. I choose to think I could feel. And of course I couldn't. We've lost the power. All the old, horrible, splendid things are dead and done with."

"The old passions, you mean?"

"And the old poems! *You'll* never write like that again."

"God forbid!" said Cliffe, under his breath. Then as Kitty rose he followed her with his eyes. "Lady Kitty, you've thrown me a challenge that you hardly understand. Some day I must answer it."

"Don't answer it," said Kitty, hastily.

"Yes, if I can drag the words out," he said, sombrely. She met his look in a kind of fascination, excited by the memory of the story which had been told her, by her own audacity in speaking of it, by the presence of the dead passion she divined lying shrouded and ghastly in the

The Marriage of William Ashe

mind of the man beside her. Even the ugly things of which he was accused did but add to the interest of his personality for a nature like hers, greedy of experience, and discontented with the real.

While he on his side was flattered and astonished by her attitude towards him, as Ashe's wife, she would surely dislike and try to trample on him. That was what he had expected.

"I hear you are an Archangel, Lady Kitty," said the Dean, who, having obstinately outstayed all the other guests, had now settled his small person and his thin legs into a chair beside his hostess with a view to five agreeable minutes. He was the most harmless of social epicures, was the Dean, and he felt that Lady Kitty had defrauded him at lunch in favor of that great, ruffling, Byronic fellow Cliffe, who ought to have better taste than to come lunching with the Ashes.

"Am I?" said Kitty, who had thrown herself into the corner of a sofa, and sat curled up there in an attitude which the Dean thought charming, though it would not, he was aware, have become Mrs. Winston.

"Well, you know best," said the Dean. "But, at any rate, be good and explain to me what is an Archangel."

"Somebody whom most men and all women dislike," said Kitty, promptly.

"Yet they seem to be numerous," remarked the Dean.

"Not at all!" cried Kitty, with an air of offence; "not at all! If they were numerous they would, of course, be popular."

"And in fact they are rare—and detested? What other characteristics have they?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Courage," said Kitty, looking up.

"Courage to break rules? I hear they all call one another by their Christian names, and live in one another's rooms, and borrow one another's money, and despise conventionalities. I am sorry you are an Archangel, Lady Kitty."

"I didn't admit that I was," said Kitty, "but if I am, why are you sorry?"

"Because," said the Dean, smiling, "I thought you were too clever to despise conventionalities."

Kitty sat up with revived energy, and joined battle. She flew into a tirade as to the dulness and routine of English life, the stupidity of good people, and the tyranny of English hypocrisy. The Dean listened with amusement, then with a shade of something else. At last he got up to go.

"Well, you know, we have heard all that before. My point of view is so much more interesting—subtle—romantic! Anybody can attack Mrs. Grundy, but only a person of originality can adore her. Try it, Lady Kitty. It would be really worth your while."

Kitty mocked and exclaimed.

"Do you know what that phrase—that name of abomination—always recalls to me?" pursued the old man.

"It bores me, even to guess," was Kitty's petulant reply.

"Does it? I think of some of the noblest people I have ever known—brave men—beautiful women—who fought Mrs. Grundy, and perished."

The Dean stood looking down upon her, with an eager, sensitive expression. Tales that he had heeded

The Marriage of William Ashe

very little when he had first heard them ran through his mind; he had thought Lady Kitty's intimate *tête-à-tête* with her husband's assailant in the press disagreeable and unseemly; and as for Mrs. Alcot, he had disliked her particularly.

Kitty looked up unquelled.

“'Tis better to have fought and lost
Than never to have fought at all—”

she quoted, with one of her most radiant and provoking smiles.

“Incorrigible!” cried the Dean, catching up his hat. “I see! Once an Archangel—always an Archangel.”

“Oh no!” said Kitty. “There may be ‘war in heaven.’”

“Well, don't take Mrs. Alcot for a leader, that's all,” said the Dean, as he held out a hand of farewell.

“And now I understand!” cried Kitty, triumphantly. “You detest my best friend.”

The Dean laughed, protested, and went. Ashe, who had been writing letters while Kitty and the Dean were talking, escorted the old man to the door.

When he returned he found Kitty sitting with her hands in her lap, lost apparently in thought.

“Darling,” he said, looking at his watch, “I must be off directly, but I should like to see the boy.”

Kitty started. She rang, and the child was brought down. He sat on Kitty's knee, and Ashe coming to the sofa, threw an arm round them both.

“You are not a bad-looking pair,” he said, kissing first

The Marriage of William Ashe

Kitty and then the baby. "But he's rather pale, Kitty. I think he wants the country."

Kitty said nothing, but she lifted the little white embroidered frock and looked at the twisted foot. Then Ashe felt her shudder.

"Dear, don't be morbid!" he cried, resentfully. "He will have so much brains that nobody will remember that. Think of Byron."

Kitty did not seem to have heard.

"I remember so well when I first saw his foot—after your mother told me—and they brought him to me," she said, slowly. "It seemed to me it was the end—"

"The end of what?"

"Of my dream."

"What *do* you mean, Kitty!"

"Do you remember the mask in the 'Tempest'? First Iris, with saffron wings, and rich Ceres, and great Juno—"

She half closed her eyes.

"Then the nymphs and the reapers—dancing together on 'the short-grassed green,' the sweetest, gayest show—"

She breathed the words out softly. "Then, suddenly—"

She sat up stiffly and struck her small hands together:

"Prospero starts and speaks. And in a moment—without warning—with 'a strange, hollow, and confused noise'"—she dragged the words drearily—"they *heavily vanish*. That"—she pointed, shuddering, to the child's foot—"was for me the sign of Prospero."

The Marriage of William Ashe

Ashe looked at her with anxiety, finding it indeed impossible to laugh at her.

She was very pale, her breath came with difficulty, and she trembled from head to foot. He tried to draw her into his arms, but she held him away.

"That first year I had been so happy," she continued, in the same voice. "Everything was so perfect, so glorious. Life was like a great pageant, in a palace. All the old terrors went. I often had fears as a child—fears I couldn't put into words, but that overshadowed me. Then when I saw Alice—the shadow came nearer. But that was all gone. I thought God was reconciled to me, and would always be kind to me now. And then I saw that foot, and I knew that He hated me still. He had burned His mark into my baby's flesh. And I was never to be quite happy again, but always in fear, fear of pain—and death—and grief—"

She paused. Her large eyes gazed into vacancy, and her whole slight frame showed the working of some mysterious and pitiful distress.

A wave of poignant alarm swept through Ashe's mind, coupled also with a curious sense of something foreseen. He had never witnessed precisely this mood in her before; but now that it was thus revealed, he was suddenly aware that something like it had been for long moving obscurely below the surface of her life. He took the child and laid him on the floor, where he rolled at ease, cooing to himself. Then he came back to Kitty, and soothed her with extraordinary tenderness and skill. Presently she looked at him, as though some obscure trouble of which she had been the victim had released her, and she were herself again.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Don't go away just yet," she said, in a voice which was still low and shaken. He came close to her, again put his arms round her, and held her on his breast in silence.

"That is heavenly!" he heard her say to herself after a while, in a whisper.

"Kitty!" His eyes grew dim and he stooped to kiss her.

"Heavenly—" she went on, still as though following out her own thought rather than speaking to him, "because one *yields—yields!* Life is such tension—always."

She closed her eyes quickly, and he watched the beautiful lashes lying still upon her cheek. With an emotion he could not explain—for it was not an emotion of the senses, just as her yielding had not been a yielding of the senses but a yielding of the soul—he continued to hold her in his arms, her life, her will given to him wholly, sighed out upon his heart.

Then gradually she recovered her balance; the normal Kitty came back. She put out her hand and touched his face.

"You must go back to the House, William."

"Yes, if you are all right."

She sat up, and began to rearrange some of her hair that had slipped down.

"You have carried us both into such heights and depths, darling!" said Ashe, after he had watched her a little in silence, "that I have forgotten to tell you the gossip I brought back from mother this morning."

Kitty paused, interrogatively. She was still pale.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Do you know that mother is convinced Mary Lyster has made up her mind to marry Cliffe?"

There was a pause, then Kitty said, with incredulous contempt: "He would never *dream* of marrying her!"

"Not so sure! She has a great deal of money, and Cliffe wants money badly."

Ashe began to put his papers together. Kitty questioned him a little more, intermittently, as to what his mother had said. When he had left her, she sat for long on the sofa, playing with some flowers she had taken from her dress, or sombrely watching the child, as it lay on the floor beside her.

X

"MY lady! It's come!"

The maid put her head in just to convey the good news. Kitty was in her bedroom walking up and down in a fury which was now almost speechless.

The housemaid was waiting on the stairs. The butler was waiting in the hall. Till that hurried knock was heard at the front door, and the much-tried Wilson had rushed to open it, the house had been wrapped in a sort of storm silence. It was ten o'clock on the night of the ball. Half Kitty's costume lay spread out upon her bed. The other half—although since seven o'clock all Kitty's servants had been employed in rushing to Fanchette's establishment in New Bond Street, at half-hour intervals, in the fastest hansoms to be found—had not yet appeared.

However, here at last was the end of despair. A panting boy dragged the box into the hall, the butler and footman carried it up-stairs and into their mistress's room, where Kitty in a white peignoir stood waiting, with the brow of Medea.

"The boy that brought it looked just fit to drop, my lady!" said the maid, as she undid the box. She was a zealous servant, but she was glad sometimes to chasten these great ones of the land by insisting on the seamy side of their pleasures.

The Marriage of William Ashe

Kitty paused in the eager task of superintendence, and turned to the under-housemaid, who stood by, gazing open-mouthed at the splendors emerging from the box.

"Run down and tell Wilson to give him some wine and cake!" she said, peremptorily. "It's all Fanchette's fault—odious creature!—running it to the last like this—after all her promises!"

The housemaid went, and soon sped back. For no boy on earth would she have been long defrauded of the sight of her ladyship's completed gown.

"Did Wilson feed him?" Kitty flung her the question as she bent, alternately frowning and jubilant, over the creation before her.

"Yes, my lady. It was quite a little fellow. He said his legs were just run off his feet," said the girl, growing confused as the moon-robe unfolded.

"Poor wretch!" said Kitty, carelessly. "I'm glad I'm not an errand—Blanche! you know Fanchette may be an old demon, but she *has* got taste! Just look at these folds, and the way she's put on the pearls! Now then—make haste!"

Off flew the peignoir, and, with the help of the excited maids, Kitty slipped into her dress. Ten times over did she declare that it was hopeless, that it didn't fit in the least, that it wasn't one bit what she had ordered, that she couldn't and wouldn't go out in it, that it was simply scandalous, and Fanchette should never be paid a penny. Her maids understood her, and simply went on pulling, patting, fastening, as quickly as their skilled fingers could work, till the last fold fell into its place, and the under-housemaid stepped back with clasped

The Marriage of William Ashe

hands and an "Oh, my lady!" couched in a note of irrepressible ecstasy.

"Well?" said Kitty, still frowning—"eh, Blanche?"

The maid proper would have scorned to show emotion; but she nodded approval. "If you ask me, my lady, I think you have never looked so well in anything."

Kitty's brow relaxed at last, as she stood gazing at the reflection in the large glass before her. She saw herself as Artemis—à la Madame de Longueville—in a hunting-dress of white silk, descending to the ankles, embroidered from top to toe in crescents of seed pearls and silver, and held at the waist by a silver girdle. Her throat was covered with magnificent pearls, a Tranmore family possession, lent by Lady Tranmore for the occasion. The slim ankles and feet were cased in white silk, cross-gartered with silver and shod with silver sandals. Her belt held her quiver of white-winged arrows; her bow of ivory inlaid with silver was slung at her shoulder, while across her breast, the only note of color in the general harmony of white, fell a scarf of apple-green holding the horn, also of ivory and silver, which, like the belt and bow, had been designed for her in Madame de Longueville's Paris.

But neither she nor her model would have been finally content with an adornment so delicately fanciful and minute. Both Kitty and the goddess of the Fronde knew that they must hold their own in a crowd. For this there must be diamonds. The sleeves, therefore, on the white arms fell back from diamond clasps; the ivory spear in her right hand was topped by a small genius with glittering wings; and in the masses of her fair hair, bound with pearl fillets, shone the large diamond



THE FINISHING TOUCHES



The Marriage of William Ashe

crescent that Lady Tranmore had foreseen, with one small attendant star at either side.

"Well, upon my word, Kitty!" said a voice from her husband's dressing-room.

Kitty turned impetuously.

"Do you like it?" she cried. Ashe approached. She lifted her horn to her mouth and stood tiptoe. The movement was enchanting; it had in it the youth and freshness of spring woods; it suggested mountain distances and the solitudes of high valleys. Intoxication spoke in Ashe's pulses; he wished the maids had been far away that he might have taken the goddess in his very human arms. Instead of which he stood lazily smiling.

"What Endymion are you calling?" he asked her.

"Kitty, you are a dream!"

Kitty pirouetted, then suddenly stopped short and held out a foot.

"Look at those silk things, sir. Nobody but Fanchette could have made them look anything but a botch. But they spoil the dress. And all to please mother and Mrs. Grundy!"

"I like them. I suppose—the nearest you could get to buskins? You would have preferred ankles *au naturel*? I don't think you'd have been admitted, Kitty."

"Shouldn't I? And so few people have feet they can show!" sighed Kitty, regretfully.

Ashe's eyes met those of the maid, who was trying to hide her smiles, and he and she both laughed.

"What do you think about it, eh, Blanche?"

"I think her ladyship is much better as she is," said the maid, decidedly. "She'd have felt very strange when she got there."

The Marriage of William Ashe

Kitty turned upon her like a whirlwind. "Go to bed!" she said, putting both hands on the shoulders of the maid. "Go to bed at once! Esther can give me my cloak. Do you know, William, she was awake all last night thinking of her brother?"

"The brother who has had an operation? But I thought there was good news?" said Ashe, kindly.

"He's much better," put in Kitty. "She heard this afternoon. She won't be such a goose as to lie awake, I should hope, to-night. Don't let me catch you here when I get back!" she said, releasing the girl, whose eyes had filled with tears. "Mr. Ashe will help me, and if he pulls the strings into knots, I shall just cut them—so there! Go away, get your supper, and go to bed. Such a life as I've led them all to-day!" She threw up her hands in a perfunctory penitence.

The maid was forced to go, and the housemaid also returned to the hall with Kitty's opera-cloak and fan, till it should please her mistress to descend. Both of them were dead tired, but they took a genuine disinterested pleasure in Kitty's beauty and her fine frocks. She was not by any means always considerate of them; but still, with that wonderful generosity that the poor show every day to the rich, they liked her; and to Ashe every servant in the house was devoted.

Kitty meanwhile had driven Ashe to his own toilette, and was walking about the room, now studying herself in the glass, and now chattering to him through the open door.

"Have you heard anything more about Tuesday?" she asked him, presently.

"Oh yes!—compliments by the dozen. Old Parham

The Marriage of William Ashe

overtook me as I was walking away from the House, and said all manner of civil things."

"And I met Lady Parham in Marshall's," said Kitty. "She does thank so badly! I should like to show her how to do it. Dear me!" Kitty sighed. "Am I henceforth to live and die on Lady Parham's ample breast?"

She sat with one foot beating the floor, deep in meditation.

"And shall I tell you what mother said?" shouted Ashe through the door.

"Yes."

He repeated—so far as dressing would let him—a number of the charming and considered phrases in which Lady Tranmore, full of relief, pleasure, and a secret self-reproach, had expressed to him the effect produced upon herself and a select public by Kitty's performance at the Parhams'. Kitty had indeed behaved like an angel—an angel *en toilette de bal*, reciting a scene from Alfred de Musset. Such politeness to Lady Parham, such smiles, sometimes a shade malicious, for the Prime Minister, who on his side did his best to efface all memory of his speech of the week before from the mind of his fascinating guest; smiles from the Princess, applause from the audience; an evening, in fact, all froth and sweetstuff, from which Lady Parham emerged grimly content, conscious at the same time that she was henceforward very decidedly, and rather disagreeably, in the Ashes' debt; while Elizabeth Tranmore went home in a tremor of delight, happily persuaded that Ashe's path was now clear.

Kitty listened, sometimes pleased, sometimes inclined to be critical or scornful of her mother-in-law's

The Marriage of William Ashe

praise. But she did love Lady Tranmore, and on the whole she smiled. Smiles, indeed, had been Kitty's portion since that evening of strange emotion, when she had found herself sobbing in William's arms for reasons quite beyond her own defining. It was as if, like the prince in the fairy tale, some iron band round her heart had given way. She seemed to dance through the house; she devoured her child with kisses; and she was even willing sometimes to let William tell her what his mother suspected of the progress of Mary's affair with Geoffrey Cliffe, though she carefully avoided speaking directly to Lady Tranmore about it. As to Cliffe himself, she seemed to have dropped him out of her thoughts. She never mentioned him, and Ashe could only suppose she had found him disenchanting.

"Well, darling! I hope I have made a sufficient fool of myself to please you!"

Ashe had thrown the door wide, and stood on the threshold, arrayed in the brocade and fur of a Venetian noble. He was a somewhat magnificent apparition, and Kitty, who had coaxed or driven him into the dress, gave a scream of delight. She saw him before her own glass, and the crimson senator made eyes at the white goddess as they posed triumphantly together.

"You're a very rococo sort of goddess, you know, Kitty!" said Ashe. "Not much Greek about you!"

"Quite as much as I want, thank you," said Kitty, courtesying to her own reflection in the glass. "Fanchette could have taught them a thing or two! Now come along! Ah! Wait!"

And, gathering up her possessions, she left the room.

The Marriage of William Ashe

Ashe, following her, saw that she was going to the nursery, a large room on the back staircase. At the threshold she turned back and put her finger to her lip. Then she slipped in, reappearing a moment afterwards to say, in a whisper, "Nurse is not in bed. You may come in." Nurse, indeed, knew much better than to be in bed. She had been sitting up to see her ladyship's splendors, and she rose smiling as Ashe entered the room.

"A parcel of idiots, nurse, aren't we?" he said, as he, too, displayed himself, and then he followed Kitty to the child's bedside. She bent over the baby, removed a corner of the cot-blanket that might tease his cheek, touched the mottled hand softly, removed a light that seemed to her too near—and still stood looking.

"We must go, Kitty."

"I wish he were a little older," she said, discontentedly, under her breath, "that he might wake up and see us both! I should like him to remember me like this."

"Queen and huntress, come away!" said Ashe, drawing her by the hand.

Outside the landing was dimly lighted. The servants were all waiting in the hall below.

"Kitty," said Ashe, passionately, "give me one kiss. You're so sweet to-night—so sweet!"

She turned.

"Take care of my dress!" she smiled, and then she held out her face under its sparkling crescent, held it with a dainty deliberation, and let her lips cling to his.

Ashe and Kitty were soon wedged into one of the interminable lines of carriages that blocked all the

The Marriage of William Ashe

approaches to St. James's Square. The ball had been long expected, and there was a crowd in the streets, kept back by the police. The brougham went at a foot's pace, and there was ample time either for reverie or conversation. Kitty looked out incessantly, exclaiming when she caught sight of a costume or an acquaintance. Ashe had time to think over the latest phase of the negotiations with America, and to go over in his mind the sentences of a letter he had addressed to the *Times* in answer to one of great violence from Geoffrey Cliffe. His own letter had appeared that morning. Ashe was proud of it. He made bold to think that it exposed Cliffe's exaggerations and insincerities neatly, and perhaps decisively. At any rate, he hummed a cheerful tune as he thought of it.

Then suddenly and incongruously a recollection occurred to him.

"Kitty, do you know that I had a letter from your mother, this morning?"

"Had you?" said Kitty, turning to him with reluctance. "I suppose she wanted some money."

"She did. She says she is very hard up. If I cared to use it, I have an easy reply."

"What do you mean?"

"I might say, 'D——n it, we are, too!'"

Kitty laughed uneasily.

"Don't begin to talk money matters now, William, *please*."

"No, dear, I won't. But we shall really have to draw in."

"You *will* pay so many debts!" said Kitty, frowning.

Ashe went into a fit of laughter.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"That's my extravagance, isn't it? I assure you I go on the most approved principles. I divide our available money among the greatest number of hungry claimants it will stretch to. But, after all, it goes a beggarly short way."

"I know mother will think my diamond crescent a horrible extravagance," said Kitty, pouting. "But you are the only son, William, and we must behave like other people."

"Dear, don't trouble your little head," he said; "I'll manage it, somehow."

Indeed, he knew very well that he could never bring his own indolent and easy-going temper in such matters to face any real struggle with Kitty over money. He must go to his mother, who now—his father being a hopeless invalid—managed the estates with his own and the agent's help. It was, of course, right that she should preach to Kitty a little; but she would be sensible and help them out. After all, there was plenty of money. Why shouldn't Kitty spend it?

Any one who knew him well might have observed a curious contrast between his private laxity in these matters and the strictness of his public practice. He was scruple and delicacy itself in all financial matters that touched his public life—directorships, investments, and the like, no less than in all that concerned interest and patronage. He would have been a bold man who had dared to propose to William Ashe any expedient whatever by which his public place might serve his private gain. His proud and fastidious integrity, indeed, was one of the sources of his growing power. But as to private debts—and the tradesmen to whom they

The Marriage of William Ashe

were owed—his standards were still essentially those of the Whigs from whom he descended, of Fox, the all-indebted, or of Melbourne, who has left an amusing disquisition on the art of dividing a few loaves and fishes in the shape of bank-notes among a multitude of creditors.

Not that affairs were as yet very bad. Far from it. But there was little to spare for Madame d'Estrées, who ought, indeed, to want nothing; and Ashe was vaguely meditating his reply to that lady when a face in a carriage near them, which was trying to enter the line, caught his attention.

"Mary!" he said, "à la Sir Joshua—and mother. They don't see us. Query, will Cliffe take the leap to-night? Mother reports a decided increase of ardor on his part. Sorry you don't approve of it, darling!"

"It's just like lighting a lamp to put it out—that's all!" said Kitty, with vivacity. "The man who marries Mary is done for."

"Not at all. Mary's money will give him the pedestal he wants, and trust Cliffe to take care of his own individuality afterwards! Now, if you'll transfer your alarms to *Mary*, I'm with you!"

"Oh! of *course* he'll be unkind to her. She may lay her account for that. But it's the *marrying* her!" And Kitty's upper-lip curled under a slow disdain.

William laughed out.

"Kitty, really!—you remind me, please, of Miss Jane Taylor:

"'I did not think there could be found—a little heart so hard!"

Mary is thirty; she would like to be married. And why not? She'll give quite as good as she gets."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Well, she won't get — anything. Geoffrey Cliffe thinks of no one but himself."

Ashe's eyebrows went up.

"Oh, well, all men are selfish—and the women don't mind."

"It depends on how it's done," said Kitty.

Ashe declared that Cliffe was just an ordinary person, "l'homme sensuel moyen" — with a touch of genius. Except for that, no better and no worse than other people. What then?—the world was not made up of persons of enormous virtue like Lord Althorp and Mr. Gladstone. If Mary wanted him for a husband, and could capture him, both, in his opinion, would have pretty nearly got their deserts.

Kitty, however, fell into a reverie, after which she let him see a face of the same startling sweetness as she had several times shown him of late.

"Do you want me to be nice to her?" She nestled up to him.

"Bind her to your chariot wheels, madam! You can!" said Ashe, slipping a hand round hers.

Kitty pondered.

"Well, then, I won't tell her that I *know* he's still in love with the Frenchwoman. But it's on the tip of my tongue."

"Heavens!" cried Ashe. "The Vicomtesse D——, the lady of the poems? But she's dead! I thought that was over long ago."

Kitty was silent for a moment, then said, with low-voiced emphasis:

"That any one could write those poems, and then *think* of Mary!"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Yes, the poems were fine," said Ashe, "but make-believe!"

Kitty protested indignantly. Ashe bantered her a little on being one of the women who were the making of Cliffe.

"Say what you like!" she said, drawing a quick breath. "But, often and often, he says divine things—divinely! I feel them there!" And she lifted both hands to her breast with an impulsive gesture.

"Goddess!" said Ashe, kissing her hand because enthusiasm became her so well. "And to think that I should have dared to roast the divine one in a *Times* letter this morning!"

The hall and staircase of Yorkshire House were already filled with a motley and magnificent crowd when Ashe and Kitty arrived. Kitty, still shrouded in her cloak, pushed her way through, exchanging greetings with friends, shrieking a little now and then for the safety of her bow and quiver, her face flushed with pleasure and excitement. Then she disappeared into the cloak-room, and Ashe was left to wonder how he was going to endure his robes through the heat of the evening, and to exchange a laughing remark or two with the Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty, into whose company he had fallen.

"What are we doing it for?" he asked the young man, whose thin person was well set off by a Tudor dress.

"Oh, don't be superior!" said the other. "I'm going to enjoy myself like a school-boy!"

And that, indeed, seemed to be the attitude of most of

The Marriage of William Ashe

the people present. And not only of the younger members of the dazzling company. What struck Ashe particularly, as he mingled with the crowd, was the alacrity of the elder men. Here was a famous lawyer already nearing the seventies, in the Lord Chancellor's garb of a great ancestor; here an ex-Viceroy of Ireland with a son in the government, magnificent in an Elizabethan dress, his fair bushy hair and reddish beard shining above a doublet on which glittered a jewel given to the founder of his house by Elizabeth's own hand; next to him, a white-haired judge in the robes of Judge Gascoyne; a peer, no younger, at his side, in the red and blue of Mazarin: and showing each and all in their gay complacent looks a clear revival of that former masculine delight in splendid clothes which came so strangely to an end with that older world on the ruins of which Napoleon rose. So with the elder women. For this night they were young again. They had been free to choose from all the ages a dress that suited them; and the result of this renewal of a long-relinquished eagerness had been in many cases to call back a bygone self, and the tones and gestures of those years when beauty is its own chief care.

As for the young men, the young women, and the girls, the zest and pleasure of the show shone in their eyes and movements, and spread through the hall and up the crowded staircase, like a warm, contagious atmosphere. At all times, indeed, and in all countries, an aristocracy has been capable of this sheer delight in its own splendor, wealth, good looks, and accumulated treasure; whether in the Venice that Petrarch visited; or in the Rome of the Renaissance popes;

The Marriage of William Ashe

in the Versailles of the Grand Monarque; or in the Florence of to-day, which still at moments of *festa* reproduces in its midst all the costumes of the Cinquecento.

In this English case there was less dignity than there would have been in a Latin country, and more personal beauty; less grace, perhaps, and yet a something richer and more romantic.

At the top of the stairs stood a marquis in a dress of the Italian Renaissance, a Gonzaga who had sat for Titian; beside him a fair-haired wife in the white satin and pearls of Henrietta Maria; while up the marble stairs, watched by a laughing multitude above, streamed Gainsborough girls and Reynolds women, women from the courts of Elizabeth, or Henri Quatre, of Maria Theresa, or Marie Antoinette, the figures of Holbein and Vandyck, Florentines of the Renaissance, the youths of Carpaccio, the beauties of Titian and Veronese.

"Kitty, make haste!" cried a voice in front, as Kitty began to mount the stairs. "Your quadrille is just called."

Kitty smiled and nodded, but did not hurry her pace by a second. The staircase was not so full as it had been, and she knew well as she mounted it, her slender figure drawn to its full height, her eyes flashing greeting and challenge to those in the gallery, the diamond genius on her spear glittering above her, that she held the stage, and that the play would not begin without her.

And indeed her dress, her brilliance, and her beauty let loose a hum of conversation—not always friendly.

"What is she?" "Oh, something mythological! She's in the next quadrille." "My dear, she's Diana!

The Marriage of William Ashe

Look at her bow and quiver, and the moon in her hair.”
“Very incorrect!—she ought to have the towered crown!” “Absurd, such a little thing to attempt Diana! I’d back Actæon!”

The latter remark was spoken in the ear of Louis Harman, who stood in the gallery looking down. But Harman shook his head.

“You don’t understand. She’s not Greek, of course; but she’s fairyland. A child of the Renaissance, dreaming in a wood, would have seen Artemis so—dressed up and glittering, and fantastic—as the Florentines saw Venus. Small, too, like the fairies!—slipping through the leaves; small hounds, with jewelled collars, following her!”

He smiled at his own fancy, still watching Kitty with his painter’s eyes.

“She has seen a French print somewhere,” said Cliffe, who stood close by. “More Versailles in it than fairyland, I think!”

“It is *she* that is fairyland,” said Harman, still fascinated.

Cliffe’s expression showed the sarcasm of his thought. Fairy, perhaps!—with the touch of malice and inhuman mischief that all tradition attributes to the little people. Why, after that first meeting, when the conversation of a few minutes had almost swept them into the deepest waters of intimacy, had she slighted him so, in other drawing-rooms and on other occasions? She had actually neglected and avoided him—after having dared to speak to him of his secret! And now Ashe’s letter of the morning had kindled afresh his sense of rancor against a pair of people, too prosperous and too arrogant. The

The Marriage of William Ashe

stroke in the *Times* had, he knew, gone home; his vanity writhed under it, and the wish to strike back tormented him, as he watched Ashe mounting behind his wife, so handsome, careless, and urbane, his jewelled cap dangling in his hand.

The quadrille of gods and goddesses was over. Kitty had been dancing with a fine clumsy Mars, in ordinary life an honest soldier and deer-stalker, the heir to a Scotch dukedom; having as her *vis-à-vis* Madeleine Alcot—as the Flora of Botticelli's "Spring"—and slim as Mercury in fantastic Renaissance armor. All the divinities of the Pantheon, indeed, were there, but in Gallicized or Italianate form; scarcely a touch of the true antique, save in the case of one beautiful girl who wore a Juno dress of white whereof the clinging folds had been arranged for her by a young Netherlands painter, Mr. Alma Tadema, then newly settled in this country. Kitty at first envied her; then decided that she herself could have made no effect in such a gown, and threw her the praises of indifference.

When, to Kitty's sharp regret, the music stopped and the glittering crew of immortals melted into the crowd, she found behind her a row of dancers waiting for the quadrille which was to follow. This was to consist entirely of English pictures revived—Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Romney—and to be danced by those for whose families they had been originally painted. As she drew back, looking eagerly to right and left, she came across Mary Lyster. Mary wore her hair high and powdered—a black silk scarf over white satin, and a blue sash.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Awfully becoming!" said Kitty, nodding to her. "Who are you?"

"My great-great aunt!" said Mary, courtesying. "You, I see, go even farther back."

"Isn't it fun?" said Kitty, pausing beside her. "Have you seen William? Poor dear! he's so hot. How do you do?" This last careless greeting was addressed to Cliffe, whom she now perceived standing behind Mary.

Cliffe bowed stiffly.

"Excuse me. I did not see you. I was absorbed in your dress. You are Artemis, I see—with additions."

"Oh! I am an 'article de Paris,'" said Kitty. "But it seems odd that some people should take me for Joan of Arc." Then she turned to Mary. "I think your dress is quite lovely!" she said, in that warm, shy voice she rarely used except for a few intimates, and had never yet been known to waste on Mary. "Don't you admire it enormously, Mr. Cliffe?"

"Enormously," said Cliffe, pulling at his mustache. "But by now my compliments are stale."

"Is he cross about William's letter?" thought Kitty. "Well, let's leave them to themselves."

Then, as she passed him, something in the silent personality of the man arrested her. She could not forbear a look at him over her shoulder. "Are you—Oh! of course, I remember—" for she had recognized the dress and cap of the Spanish grandee.

Cliffe did not reply for a moment, but the harsh significance of his face revived in her the excitable interest she had felt in him on the day of his luncheon in Hill Street; an interest since effaced and dispersed, under the

The Marriage of William Ashe

influence of that serenity and home peace which had shone upon her since that very day.

"I should apologize, no doubt, for not taking your advice," he said, looking her in the eyes. Their expression, half bitter, half insolent, reminded her.

"Did I give you any advice?" Kitty wrinkled up her white brows. "I don't recollect."

Mary looked at her sharply, suspiciously. Kitty, quite conscious of the look, was straightway pricked by an elfish curiosity. Could she carry him off—trouble Mary's possession there and then? She believed she could. She was well aware of a certain relation between herself and Cliffe, if, at least, she chose to develop it. Should she? Her vanity insisted that Mary could not prevent it.

However, she restrained herself and moved on. Presently looking back, she saw them still together, Cliffe leaning against the pedestal of a bust, Mary beside him. There was an animation in her eyes, a rose of pleasure on her cheek which stirred in Kitty a queer, sudden sympathy. "*I am* a little beast!" she said to herself. "Why shouldn't she be happy?"

Then, perceiving Lady Tranmore at the end of the ballroom, she made her way thither surrounded by a motley crowd of friends. She walked as though on air, "raining influence." And as Lady Tranmore caught the glitter of the diamond crescent, and beheld the small divinity beneath it, she, too, smiled with pleasure, like the other spectators on Kitty's march. The dress was monstrously costly. She knew that. But she forgot the inroad on William's pocket, and remembered only to be proud of William's wife. Since the Parhams' party,

The Marriage of William Ashe

indeed, the unlooked-for submission of Kitty, and the clearing of William's prospects, Lady Tranmore had been sweetness itself to her daughter-in-law.

But her fine face and brow were none the less inclined to frown. She herself as Katharine of Aragon would have shed a dignity on any scene, but she was in no sympathy with what she beheld.

"We shall soon all of us be ashamed of this kind of thing," she declared to Kitty. "Just as people now are beginning to be ashamed of enormous houses and troops of servants."

"No, please! Only bored with them!" said Kitty. "There are so many other ways now of amusing yourself—that's all."

"Well, this way will die out," said Lady Tranmore. "The cost of it is too scandalous—people's consciences prick them."

Kitty vowed she did not believe there was a conscience in the room; and then, as the music struck up, she carried off her companion to some steps overlooking the great marble gallery, where they had a better view of the two lines of dancers.

It is said that as a nation the English have no gift for pageants. Yet every now and then—as no doubt in the Elizabethan mask—they show a strange felicity in the art. Certainly the dance that followed would have been difficult to surpass even in the ripe days and motherlands of pageantry. To the left, a long line, consisting mainly of young girls in their first bloom, dressed as Gainsborough and his great contemporaries delighted to paint these flowers of England—the folds of plain white muslin crossed over the young breast, a black velvet at

The Marriage of William Ashe

the throat, a rose in the hair, the simple skirt showing the small pointed feet, and sometimes a broad sash defining the slender waist. Here were Stanleys, Howards, Percys, Villierses, Butlers, Osbornes—soft slips of girls bearing the names of England's rough and turbulent youth, bearing themselves to-night with a shy or laughing dignity, as though the touch of history and romance were on them. And facing them, the youths of the same families, no less handsome than their sisters and brides—in Romney's blue coats, or the splendid red of Reynolds and Gainsborough.

To and fro swayed the dancers, under the innumerable candles that filled the arched roof and upper walls of the ballroom; and each time the lines parted they disclosed at the farther end another pageant, to which that of the dance was in truth subordinate—a dais hung with blue and silver, and upon it a royal lady whose beauty, then in its first bloom, has been a national possession, since as the "sea-king's daughter" she brought it in dowry to her adopted country. To-night she blazed in jewels as a Valois queen, with her court around her, and as the dancers receded, each youth and maiden seemed instinctively to turn towards her as roses to the sun.

"Oh, beautiful, beautiful world!" said Kitty to herself, in an ecstasy, pressing her small hands together; "how I love you!—*love* you!"

Meanwhile Darrell and Harman stood side by side near the doorway of the ballroom, looking in when the crowd allowed.

"A strange sight," said Harman. "Perhaps they take it too seriously."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Ah! that is our English upper class," said Darrell, with a sneer. "Is there anything they take lightly?—*par exemple!* It seems to me they carry off this amusement better than most. They may be stupid, but they are good-looking. I say, Ashe"—he turned towards the new-comer who had just sauntered up to them—"on this exceptional occasion, is it allowed to congratulate you on Lady Kitty's gown?"

For Kitty, raised upon her step, was at the moment in full view.

Ashe made some slight reply, the slightest of which indeed annoyed the thin-skinned and morbid Darrell, always on the lookout for affronts. But Louis Harman, who happened to observe the Under-Secretary's glance at his wife, said to himself, "By George! that queer marriage is turning out well, after all."

The Tudor and Marie Antoinette quadrilles had been danced. There was a rumor of supper in the air.

"William!" said Kitty, in his ear, as she came across him in one of the drawing-rooms, "Lord Hubert takes me in to supper. Poor me!" She made an extravagant face of self-pity and swept on. Lord Hubert was one of the sons of the house, a stupid and inarticulate guardsman, Kitty's butt and detestation. Ashe smiled to himself over her fate, and went back to the ballroom in search of his own lady.

Meanwhile Kitty paused in the next drawing-room, and dismissed her following.

"I promised to wait here for Lord Hubert," she said. "You go on, or you'll get no tables."

And she waved them peremptorily away. The draw-

The Marriage of William Ashe

ing-room, one of a suite which looked on the garden, thinned temporarily. In a happy fatigue, Kitty leaned dreamily over the ledge of one of the open windows, looking at the illuminated space below her. Amid the colored lights, figures of dream and fantasy walked up and down. In the midst flashed a flame-colored fountain. The sounds of a Strauss waltz floated in the air. And beyond the garden and its trees rose the dull roar of London.

A silk curtain floated out into the room under the westerly breeze, then, returning, sheathed Kitty in its folds. She stood there hidden, amusing herself like a child with the thought of startling that great heavy goose, Lord Hubert.

Suddenly a pair of voices that she knew caught her ear. Two persons, passing through, lingered, without perceiving her. Kitty, after a first movement of self-disclosure, caught her own name and stood motionless.

"Well, of course you've heard that we got through," said Lady Parham. "For once Lady Kitty behaved herself!"

"You were lucky!" said Mary Lyster. "Lady Transmore was dreadfully anxious—"

"Lest she should cut us at the last?" cried Lady Parham. "Well, of course, Lady Kitty is 'capable de tout.'" She laughed. "But perhaps as you are a cousin I oughtn't to say these things."

"Oh, say what you like," said Mary. "I am no friend of Kitty's, and never pretended to be."

Lady Parham came closer, apparently, and said, confidentially: "What on earth made that man marry

The Marriage of William Ashe

her? He might have married anybody. She had no money, and worse than no position."

"She worked upon his pity, of course, a good deal. I saw them in the early days at Grosville Park. She played her cards very cleverly. And then, it was just the right moment. Lady Tranmore had been urging him to marry."

"Well, of course," said Lady Parham, "there's no denying the beauty."

"You think so?" said Mary, as though in wonder. "Well, I never could see it. And now she has so much gone off."

"I don't agree with you. Many people think her the star to-night. Mr. Cliffe, I am told, admires her."

Kitty could not see how the eyes of the speaker, under a Sir Joshua turban, studied the countenance of Miss Lyster, as she threw out the words.

Mary laughed.

"Poor Kitty! She tried to flirt with him long ago—just after she arrived in London, fresh out of the convent. It was so funny! He told me afterwards he never was so embarrassed in his life—this baby making eyes at him! And now—oh no!"

"Why not now? Lady Kitty's very much the rage, and Mr. Cliffe likes notoriety."

"But a notoriety with—well, with some style, some distinction! Kitty's sort is so cheap and silly."

"Ah, well, she's not to be despised," said Lady Parham. "She's as clever as she can be. But her husband will have to keep her in order."

"Can he?" said Mary. "Won't she always be in his way?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Always, I should think. But he must have known what he was about. Why didn't his mother interfere? Such a family!—such a history!"

"She did interfere," said Mary. "We all did our best"—she dropped her voice—"I know I did. But it was no use. If men like spoiled children they must have them, I suppose. Let's hope he'll learn how to manage her. Shall we go on? I promised to meet my supper-partner in the library."

They moved away.

For some minutes Kitty stood looking out, motionless, but the beating of her heart choked her. Strange ancestral things—things of evil—things of passion—had suddenly awoke, as it were, from sleep in the depths of her being, and rushed upon the citadel of her life. A change had passed over her from head to foot. Her veins ran fire.

At that moment, turning round, she saw Geoffrey Cliffe enter the room in which she stood. With an impetuous movement she approached him.

"Take me down to supper, Mr. Cliffe. I can't wait for Lord Hubert any more, I'm so hungry!"

"Enchanted!" said Cliffe, the color leaping into his tanned face as he looked down upon the goddess. "But I came to find—"

"Miss Lyster? Oh, she is gone in with Mr. Darrell. Come with me. I have a ticket for the reserved tent. We shall have a delicious corner to ourselves."

And she took from her glove the little coveted pasteboard, which—handed about in secret to a few intimates

The Marriage of William Ashe

of the house—gave access to the sanctum sanctorum of the evening.

Cliffe wavered. Then his vanity succumbed. A few minutes later the supper guests in the tent of the *élite* saw the entrance of a darkly splendid Duke of Alva, with a little sandalled goddess, all compact, it seemed, of ivory and fire, on his arm.

XI

THE spring freshness of London had long since departed. A crowded season; much animation in Parliament, where the government, to its own amazement, had rather gained than lost ground; industrial trouble at home, and foreign complications abroad; and in London the steady growth of a new plutocracy, the result, so far, of American wealth and American brides. In the first week of July, the outward things of the moment might have been thus summed up by any careful observer.

On a certain Tuesday night, the debate on a private member's bill unexpectedly collapsed, and the House rose early. Ashe left the House with his secretary, but parted from him at the corner of Birdcage Walk, and crossed the park alone. He meant to join Kitty at a party in Piccadilly; there was just time to go home and dress; and he walked at a quick pace.

Two members sitting on the same side of the House with himself were also going home. One of them noticed the Under-Secretary.

"A very ineffective statement Ashe made to-night—don't you think so?" he said to his companion.

"Very! Really, if the government can't take up a stronger line, the general public will begin to think there's something in it."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Oh, if you only shriek long enough and sharp enough in England something's sure to come of it. Cliffe and his group have been playing a very shrewd game. The government will get their agreement approved all right, but Cliffe has certainly made some people on our side uneasy. However—"

"However, what?" said the other, after a moment.

"I wish I thought that were the only reason for Ashe's change of tone," said the first speaker, slowly.

"What do you mean?"

The two were intimate personal friends, belonging, moreover, to a group of evangelical families well known in English life; but even so, the answer came with reluctance:

"Well, you see, it's not very easy to grapple in public with the man whose name all smart London happens to be coupling with that of your wife!"

"I say"—the other stood still, in genuine consternation and distress—"you don't mean to say that there's that in it!"

"You notice that the difference is not in *what* Ashe says, but in *how* he says it. He avoids all personal collision with Cliffe. The government stick to their case, but Ashe mentions everybody but Cliffe, and confutes all arguments but his. And meanwhile, of course, the truth is that Cliffe is the head and front of the campaign, and if he threw up to-morrow, everything would quiet down."

"And Lady Kitty is flirting with him at this particular moment? Damned bad taste and bad feeling, to say the least of it!"

"You won't find one of the Bristol lot consider that

The Marriage of William Ashe

kind of thing when their blood is up!" said the other. "You remember the tales of old Lord Blackwater?"

"But is there really any truth in it? Or is it mere gossip?"

"Well, I hear that the behavior of both of them at Grosville Park last week was such that Lady Grosville vows she will never ask either of them again. And at Ascot, at Lord's, the opera, Lady Kitty sits with him, talks with him, walks with him, the whole time, and won't look at any one else. They must be asked together or neither will come—and 'society,' as far as I can make out, thinks it a good joke and is always making plans to throw them together."

"Can't Lady Tranmore do anything?"

"I don't know. They say she is very unhappy about it. Certainly she looks ill and depressed."

"And Ashe?"

His companion hesitated. "I don't like to say it, but, of course, you know there are many people who will tell you that Ashe doesn't care twopence what his wife does so long as she is nice to him, and he can read his books and carry on his politics as he pleases!"

"Ashe always strikes me as the soul of honor," said the other, indignantly.

"Of course—for himself. But a more fatalist believer in liberty than Ashe doesn't exist—liberty especially to damn yourself—if you must and will."

"It would be hard to extend that doctrine to a wife," said the other, with a grave, uncomfortable laugh.

Meanwhile the man whose affairs they had been discussing walked home, wrapped in solitary and disagreeable

The Marriage of William Ashe

thought. As he neared the Marlborough House corner a carriage passed him. It was delayed a moment by other carriages, and as it halted beside him Ashe recognized Lady M——, the hostess of the fancy ball, and a very old friend of his parents. He took off his hat. The lady within recognized him and inclined slightly—very slightly and stiffly. Ashe started a little and walked on.

The meeting vividly recalled the ball, the *terminus a quo* indeed from which the meditation in which he had been plunged since entering the park had started. Between six and seven weeks ago, was it? It might have been a century. He thought of Kitty as she was that night—Kitty pirouetting in her glittering dress, or bending over the boy, or holding her face to his as he kissed her on the stairs. Never since had she shown him the smallest glimpse of such a mood. What was wrong with her and with himself? Something, since May, had turned their life topsy-turvy, and it seemed to Ashe that in the general unprofitable rush of futile engagements he had never yet had time to stop and ask himself what it might be.

Why, at any rate, was *he* in this chafing irritation and discomfort? Why could he not deal with that fellow Cliffe as he deserved? And what in Heaven's name was the reason why old friends like Lady M—— were beginning to look at him coldly, and avoid his conversation?

His mother, too! He gathered that quite lately there had been some disagreeable scene between her and Kitty. Kitty had resented some remonstrance of hers, and for some days now they had not met. Nor had Ashe seen his mother alone. Did she also avoid him, shrink from speaking out her real mind to him?

The Marriage of William Ashe

Well, it was all monstrously absurd!—a great coil about nothing, as far as the main facts were concerned; although the annoyance and worry of the thing were indeed becoming serious. Kitty had no doubt taken a wild liking to Geoffrey Cliffe—

“And, by Georgel” said Ashe, pausing in his walk, “she warned me.”

And there rose in his memory the formal garden at Grosville Park, the little figure at his side, and Kitty’s franknesses—“I shall take mad fancies for people. I sha’n’t be able to help it. I have one now, for Geoffrey Cliffe.”

He smiled. There was the difficulty! If only the people whose envious tongues were now wagging could see Kitty as she was, could understand what a gulf lay between her and the ordinary “fast” woman, there would be an end of this silly, ill-natured talk. Other women might be of the earth earthy. Kitty was a sprite, with all the irresponsibility of such incalculable creatures. The men and women—women especially—who gossiped and lied about her, who sent abominable paragraphs to scurrilous papers—he had one now in his pocket which had reached him at the House from an anonymous correspondent—spoke out of their own vile experience, judged her by their own standards. His mother, at any rate—he proudly thought—ought to know better than to be misled by them for a moment.

At the same time, something must be done. It could not be denied that Kitty had been behaving like a romantic, excitable child with this unscrupulous man, whose record with regard to women was probably wholly unknown to her, however foolishly she might idealize

The Marriage of William Ashe

the *liaison* commemorated in his poems. What had Kitty, indeed, been doing with herself this six weeks? Ashe tried to recall them in detail. Ascot, Lord's, innumerable parties in London and in the country, to some of which he had not been able to accompany her, owing to the stress of Parliamentary and official work. Grosville Park, for instance—he had been stopped at the last moment from going down there by the arrival of some important foreign news, and Kitty had gone alone. She had reappeared on the Monday, pale and furious, saying that she and her aunt had quarrelled, and that she would never go near the Grosvilles either in town or country again. She had not volunteered any further explanation, and Ashe had refrained from inquiry. There were in him certain disgusts and disdains, belonging to his general epicurean conception of existence, which not even his love for Kitty could overcome. One was a disdain for the quarrels of women. He supposed they were inevitable; he saw, by-the-way, that Kitty and Lady Parham were once more at daggers drawn; and Kitty seemed to enjoy it. Well, it was her own affair; but while there was a Greek play, or a Shakespeare sonnet, or even a Blue Book to read, who could expect him to listen?

What had old Lady Grosville been about? He understood that Cliffe had been of the party. And Kitty must have done something to bring down upon her the wrath of the Puritanical mistress of the house.

Well, what was he to do? It was now July. The session would last, certainly till the middle of August, and though the American business would be disposed of directly, there was fresh trouble in the Balkan Peninsula,

The Marriage of William Ashe

and an anxious situation in Egypt. Impossible that he should think of leaving his post. And as for the chance of a dissolution, the government was now a good deal stronger than it had been before Easter—worse luck!

Of course he ought to take Kitty away. But short of resignation how was it to be done? And what, even, would resignation do—supposing, *per impossibile*, it could be thought of—but give to gnawing gossip a bigger bone, and probably irritate Kitty to the point of rebellion? Yet how induce her to go with any one else? Lady Tranmore was out of the question. Margaret French, perhaps?

Then, suddenly, Ashe was assailed by an inner laughter, hollow and uncomfortable. Things were come to a pretty pass when he must even dream of resigning because a man whom he despised would haunt his house, and absorb the company of his wife; when, moreover, he could not even think of a remedy for such a state of things without falling back dismayed from the certainty of Kitty's temper—Kitty's wild and furious temper.

For during the last fortnight, as it seemed to Ashe, all the winds of tempest had been blowing through his house. Himself, the servants, even Margaret, even the child, had all suffered. He also had lost his temper several times—such a thing had scarcely happened to him since his childhood. He thought of it as of a kind of physical stain or weakness. To keep an even and stoical mind, to laugh where one could not conquer—this had always seemed to him the first condition of decent existence. And now to be wrangling over an expenditure, an engagement, a letter, the merest nothing—whether it was

The Marriage of William Ashe

a fine day or it wasn't—could anything be more petty, degrading, intolerable?

He vowed that this should stop. Whatever happened, he and Kitty should not degenerate into a pair of scolds—besmirch their life with quarrels as ugly as they were silly. He would wrestle with her, his beloved, unreasonable, foolish Kitty; he ought, of course, to have done so before. But it was only within the last week or so that the horizon had suddenly darkened—the thing grown serious. And now this beastly paragraph! But, after all, what did such garbage matter? It would of course be a comfort to thrash the editor. But our modern life breeds such creatures, and they have to be borne.

He let himself into a silent house. His letters lay on the hall-table. Among them was a handwriting which arrested him. He remembered, yet could not put a name to it. Then he turned the envelope. "H'm. Lady Grosville!" He read it, standing there, then thrust it into his pocket, thinking angrily that there seemed to be a good many fools in this world who occupied themselves with other people's business. Exaggeration, of course, damnable *parti pris*! When did she ever see Kitty except with a jaundiced eye? "I wonder Kitty condescends to go to the woman's house! She must know that everything she does is seen there *en noir*. Pharisaical, narrow-minded Philistines!"

The letter acted as a tonic. Ashe was positively grateful to the "old gorgon" who wrote it. He ran up-stairs, his pulses tingling in defence of Kitty. He would show Lady Grosville that she could not write to him, at any rate, in that strain, with impunity.

The Marriage of William Ashe

He took a candle from the landing, and opened his wife's door in order to pass through her room to his own. As he did so, he ran against Kitty's maid, Blanche, who was coming out. She shrank back as she saw him, but not before the light of his candle had shone full upon her. Her face was disfigured with tears, which were, indeed, still running down her cheeks.

"Why, Blanche!" he said, standing still—then in the kind voice which endeared him to the servants—"I am afraid your brother is worse?"

For the poor brother in hospital had passed through many vicissitudes since his operation, and the little maid's spirits had fluctuated accordingly.

"Oh no, sir—no, sir!" said Blanche, drying her eyes and retreating into the shadows of the room, where only a faint flame of gas was burning. "It's not that, sir, thank you. I was just putting away her ladyship's things," she said, inconsequently, looking round the room.

"That was hardly what caused the tears, was it?" said Ashe, smiling. "Is there anything in which Lady Kitty or I could help you?"

The girl, who had always seemed to him on excellent terms with Kitty, gave a sudden sob.

"Thank you, sir; I've just given her ladyship warning."

"Indeed!" said Ashe, gravely. "I'm sorry for that. I thought you got on here very well."

"I used to, sir, but this last few weeks there's nothing pleases her ladyship; you can't do anything right. I'm sure I've worked my hands off. But I can't do any more. Perhaps her ladyship will find some one else to suit her better."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Didn't her ladyship try to persuade you to stay?"

"Yes—but—I gave warning once before, and then I stayed. And it's no good. It seems as if you must do wrong. And I don't sleep, sir. It gets on your nerves so. But I didn't mean to complain. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night. Don't sit up for your mistress. You look tired out. I'll help her."

"Thank you, sir," said the maid, in a depressed voice, and went.

Half an hour later, Ashe mounted the staircase of a well-known house in Piccadilly. The evening party was beginning to thin, but in a side drawing-room a fine Austrian band was playing Strauss, and some of the intimates of the house were dancing.

Ashe at once perceived his wife. She was dancing with a clever Cambridge lad, a cousin of Madeleine Alcot's, who had long been one of her adorers. And so charming was the spectacle, so exhilarating were the youth and beauty of the pair, that Ashe presently suspected what was indeed the truth, that most of the persons gathering in the room were there to watch Kitty dance, rather than to dance themselves. He himself watched her, though he professed to be talking to his hostess, a woman of middle age, with honest eyes and a brow of command.

"It is a delight to see Lady Kitty dance," she said to him, smiling. "But she is tired. I am sure she wants the country."

"Like my boy," said Ashe. "I wish to goodness they'd both go."

"Oh, I know it's hard to leave the husband toiling in

The Marriage of William Ashe

town!" said his companion, who, as the daughter, wife, and mother of politicians, had had a long experience of official life.

Ashe glanced at her—at her face moulded by kind and scrupulous living—with a sudden relief from tension. Clearly no gossip had reached her. He lingered beside her, for the sheer pleasure of talking to her. But their *tête-à-tête* was soon interrupted by the approach of Lady Parham, with a daughter—a slim and silent girl, to whom, it was whispered, her mother was giving "a last chance" this season, before sending her into the country as a failure, and bringing out her younger sister.

Lady Parham greeted the hostess with effusion. It was a rich house, and these small, informal dances were said to be more helpful to matrimonial development than larger affairs. Then she perceived Ashe, and her whole manner changed. There was a very evident bristling, and she gave him a greeting deliberately careless.

"Confound the woman!" thought Ashe, and his own pride rose.

"Working as hard as usual, Lady Parham?" he asked her, with a smile.

"If you like to put it so," was the stiff reply. "There is, of course, a good deal of going out."

"I hope, if I may say so, you don't allow Lord Parham to do too much of it."

"Lord Parham never was better in his life," said Lord Parham's spouse, with the air of putting down an impertinence.

"That's good news. I must say when I saw him this afternoon I thought he seemed to be feeling his work a good deal."

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Oh, he's worried," said Lady Parham, sharply. "Worried about a good many things." She turned suddenly, and looked at her companion—an insolent and deliberate look.

"Ah, that's where the wives come in!" replied Ashe, unperturbed. "Look at Mrs. Loraine. She has the art to perfection—hasn't she? The way she cushions Loraine is something wonderful to see."

Lady Parham flushed angrily. The suggested comparison between herself, and that incessant rattle and blare of social event through which she dragged her husband—conducting thereby a vulgar campaign of her own, as arduous as his and far more ambitious—and the ways and character of gentle Mrs. Loraine, absorbed in the man she adored, scatter-brained and absent-minded towards the rest of the world, but for him all eyes and ears, an angel of shelter and protection—this did not now reach the Prime Minister's wife for the first time. But she had no opportunity to launch a retort, even supposing she had one ready, for the music ceased, and the tide of dancers surged towards the doors. It brought Kitty abruptly face to face with Lady Parham.

"Oh! how d'you do?" said Kitty, in a tone that was already an offence, and she held out a small hand with an indescribably regal air.

Lady Parham just touched it, glanced at the owner from top to toe, and walked away. Kitty slipped in beside Ashe for a moment, with her back to the wall, laughing and breathless.

"I say, Kitty," said Ashe, bending over her and speaking in her small ear, "I thought Lady Parham was eternally obliged to us. What's wrong with her?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Only that I can't stand her," said Kitty. "What's the good of trying?" She looked up, a flame of mutiny in her cheeks.

"What, indeed?" said Ashe, feeling as reckless as she. "Her manners are beyond the bounds. But look here, Kitty, don't you think you'll come home? You know you do look uncommonly tired."

Kitty frowned.

"Home? Why, I'm only just beginning to enjoy myself! Take me into the cool, please," she said to the boy who had been dancing with her, and who still hovered near, in case his divinity might allow him yet a few more minutes. But as she put out her hand to take his arm, Ashe saw her waver and look suddenly across the room.

A group parted that had been clustering round a farther door, and Ashe perceived Cliffe, leaning against the doorway with his arms crossed. He was surrounded by pretty women, with whom he seemed to be carrying on a bantering warfare. Involuntarily Ashe watched for the recognition between him and Kitty. Did Kitty's lips move? Was there a signal? If so, it passed like a flash; Kitty hurried away, and Ashe was left, haughtily furious with himself that, for the first time in his life, he had played the spy.

He turned in his discomfort to leave the dancing-room. He himself enjoyed society frankly enough. Especially since his marriage had he found the companionship of agreeable women delightful. He went instinctively to seek it, and drive out this nonsense from his mind. Just inside the larger drawing-room, however, he came across Mary Lyster, sitting in a corner ap-

The Marriage of William Ashe

parently alone. Mary greeted him, but with an evident coldness. Her manner brought back all the preoccupations of his walk from the House. In spite of her small cordiality, he sat down beside her, wondering with a vicarious compunction at what point her fortunes might be, and how Kitty's proceedings might have already affected them. But he had not yet succeeded in thawing her when a voice behind him said:

"This is my dance, I think, Miss Lyster. Where shall we sit it out?"

Ashe moved at once. Mary looked up, hesitated visibly, then rose and took Geoffrey Cliffe's arm.

"Just read your remarks this evening," said Cliffe to Ashe. "Well, now, I suppose to-morrow will see your ship in port?"

For it was reasonably expected that the morrow would see the American agreement ratified by a substantial ministerial majority.

"Certainly. But you may at least reflect that you have lost us a deal of time."

"And now you slay us," said Cliffe. "Ah, well—*'dulce et decorum est,'* etcetera."

"Don't imagine that you'll get many of the honors of martyrdom," laughed Ashe—in Cliffe's eyes an offensive and triumphant figure, as he leaned carelessly upon a marble pedestal that carried a bust of Horace Walpole.

"Why?" Cliffe's hand had gone instinctively to his mustache. Mary had dropped his arm, and now stood quietly beside him, pale and somewhat jaded, her fine eyes travelling between the speakers.

"Why? Because the heresies have no martyrs. The halo is for the true Church!"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"H'm!" said Cliffe, with a reflective sneer. "I suppose you mean for the successful?"

"Do I?" said Ashe, with nonchalance. "Aren't the true Church the people who are justified by the event?"

"The orthodox like to think so," said Cliffe. "But the heretics have a way of coming out top."

"Does that mean you chaps are going to win at the next election? I devoutly hope you may—we're all as stale as ditch-water—and as for places, anybody's welcome to mine!" And so saying, Ashe lounged away, attracted by the bow and smile of a pretty Frenchwoman, with whom it was always agreeable to chat.

"Ashe trifles it as usual," said Cliffe, as he and Mary forced a passage into one of the smaller rooms. "Is there anything in the world that he really cares about?"

Mary looked at him with a start. It was almost on her lips to say, "Yes! his wife." She only just succeeded in driving the words back.

"His not caring is a pretence," she said. "At least, Lady Tranmore thinks so. She believes that he is becoming absorbed in politics—much more ambitious than she ever thought he would be."

"That's the way of mothers," said Cliffe, with a sarcastic lip. "They have got to make the best of their sons. Tell me what you are going to do this summer."

He had thrown one arm round the back of a chair, and sat looking down upon her, his colorless fair hair falling thick upon his brow, and giving by contrast a strange inhuman force to the dark and singular eyes beneath. He had a way of commanding a woman's attention by flashes of brusquerie, melting when he chose into a homage that had in it the note of an older world,

The Marriage of William Ashe

a world that had still leisure for passion and its refinements, a world still within sight of that other which had produced the *Carte du tendre*. Perhaps it was this, combined with the virilities, not to be questioned, of his aspect, the signs of hard physical endurance in the face burned by desert suns, and the suggestions of a frame too lean and gaunt for drawing-rooms, that gave him his spell and preserved it.

Mary's conversation with him consisted at first of much cool fencing on her part, which gradually slipped back, as he intended it should, into some of the tones of intimacy. Each meanwhile was conscious of a secret range of thoughts—hers concerned with the effort and struggle, the bitter disappointments and disillusion of the past six weeks; and his with the schemes he had cherished in the East and on the way home, of marrying Mary Lyster, or more correctly, Mary Lyster's money, and so resigning himself to the inevitable boredom of an English existence. For her the mental horizon was full of Kitty—Kitty insolent, Kitty triumphant. For him, too, Kitty made the background of thought—envisioned, however, with clouds of indecision and resistance that would have raised happiness in Mary could she have divined them.

For he was now not easy to capture. There had been enough and more than enough of women in his life. The game of politics must somehow replace them henceforth, if, indeed, anything were still worth while, except the long day in the saddle and the dawn of new mornings in untrodden lands.

Mingled, all these, with hot dislike of Ashe, with the fascination of Kitty, and a kind of venomous pleasure in

The Marriage of William Ashe

the commotion produced by his pursuit of her; interpenetrated, moreover, through and through with the memory of his one true feeling, and of the woman who had died, alienated from and despising him. He and Mary passed a profitless half-hour. He would have liked to propitiate her, but he had no notion what he should do with the propitiation, if it were reached. He wanted her money, but he was beginning to feel with restlessness that he could not pay the cost. The poet in him was still strong, crossed though it were by the adventurer.

He took her back to the dancing-room. Mary walked beside him with a dull, fierce sense of wrong. It was Kitty, of course, who had done it—Kitty who had taken him away from her.

"That's finished," said Cliffe to himself, with a long breath of relief, as he delivered her into the hands of her partner. "Now for the other!"

Thenceforward, no one saw Kitty and no one danced with her. She spent her time in beflowered corners, or remote drawing-rooms, with Geoffrey Cliffe. Ashe heard her voice in the distance once or twice, answering a voice he detested; he looked into the supper-room with a lady on his arm, and across it he saw Kitty, with her white elbow on the table and her hand propping a face that was turned—half mocking and yet wholly absorbed—to Cliffe. He saw her flitting across vistas or disappearing through far doorways, but always with that sinister figure in attendance.

His mind was divided between a secret fury—roused in him by the pride of a man of high birth and position,

The Marriage of William Ashe

who has always had the world at command, and now sees an impertinence offered him which he does not know how to punish—and a mood of irony. Cliffe's persecution of Kitty was a piece of confounded bad manners. But to look at it with the round, hypocritical eyes some of these people were bringing to bear on it was really too much! Let them look to their own affairs—they needed it.

At last the party broke up. Kitty touched him on the shoulder as he was standing on the stairs, apparently absorbed in a teasing skirmish with a charming child in her first season, who thought him the most delightful of men.

"I'm ready, William."

He turned sharply, and saw that she was alone.

"Come along, then! In five minutes more I should have been asleep on the stairs."

They descended. Kitty went for her cloak. Ashe sent for the carriage. As he was standing on the steps Cliffe pushed past him and called for a hansom. It came in the rear of two or three carriages already under the portico. He ran along the pavement and jumped in. The doors were just being shut by the linkman when a little figure in a white cloak flew down the steps of the house and held up a hand to the driver of the hansom.

"Do you see that?" said Lady Parham, in a voice of suppressed but contemptuous amazement, as she turned to Mary Lyster, who was driving home with her. "Call my carriage, please!" she said, imperiously, to one of the footmen at the door. Her carriage, as it happened, was immediately behind the hansom; but the hansom could

The Marriage of William Ashe

not move because of the small lady who had jumped upon the step and was leaning eagerly forward.

There was a clamor of shouting voices: "Move on, cabby! Move on!" "Stand clear, ma'am, please," said the driver, while Cliffe opened the door of the cab, and seemed about to jump down again.

"Who is it?" said an impatient judge behind Lady Parham. "What's the matter?"

Lady Parham shrugged her shoulders.

"It's Lady Kitty Ashe," whispered the *débutante*, who was the judge's daughter, "talking to Mr. Cliffe. Isn't she pretty?"

A sudden silence fell upon the group in the porch. Kitty's high, clear laugh seemed to ring back into the house. Then Ashe ran down the steps.

"Kitty, don't stop the way." He peremptorily drew her back.

Cliffe raised his hat, fell back into the hansom, and the man whipped up his horse.

Kitty came back to the outer hall with Ashe. Her cheeks had a rose flush, her wild eyes laughed at the crowd on the steps, without really seeing them.

"Are you going with Lady Parham?" she said, absently, to Mary Lyster.

"Yes."

Kitty looked up and Ashe saw the two faces as she and Mary confronted each other—the contempt in Mary's, the startled wrath in Kitty's

"Come, Miss Lyster!" said Lady Parham, and pushing past the Ashes without a good-night, she hurried to her carriage, drawing up the glass with a hasty hand, though the night was balmy.

The Marriage of William Ashe

For a few moments none of those left on the steps spoke, except to fret in undertones for an absent carriage. Then Ashe saw his own groom, and stormed at him for delay. In another minute he and Kitty were in the carriage, and the figures under the porch dropped out of sight.

"Better not do that again, Kitty, I think," said Ashe.

Kitty glanced at him. But both voice and manner were as usual. "Why shouldn't I?" she said, haughtily; he saw that she had grown very white. "I was telling Geoffrey where to find me at Lord's."

Ashe winced at the "Archangelism" of the Christian name.

"You kept Lady Parham waiting."

"What does that matter?" said Kitty, with an angry laugh.

"And you did Cliffe too much honor," said Ashe. "It's the men who should stand on the steps—not the women!"

Kitty sat erect. "What do you mean?" she said, in a low, menacing voice.

"Just what I say," was the laughing reply.

Kitty threw herself back in her corner, and could not be induced to open her lips or look at her companion till they reached home.

On the landing, however, outside her bedroom, she turned and said: "Don't, please, say impertinent things to me again!" And drawn up to her full height, the most childish and obstinate of tragedy queens, she swept into her room.

Ashe went into his dressing-room. And almost im-

The Marriage of William Ashe

mediately afterwards he heard the key turn in the lock which separated his room from Kitty's.

For the first time since their marriage! He threw himself on his bed, and passed some sleepless hours. Then fatigue had its way. When he awoke, there was a gray dawn in the room, and he was conscious of something pressing against his bed. Half asleep, he raised himself and saw Kitty, in a long white dressing-gown, sitting curled up on the floor, or rather on a pillow, her head resting on the edge of the bed. In a glass opposite he saw the languid grace of her slight form and the cloud of her hair.

"Kitty"—he tried to shake himself into full consciousness—"do go to bed!"

"Lie down," said Kitty, lifting her arm and pressing him down, "and don't say anything. I shall go to sleep."

He lay down obediently. Presently he felt that her cheek was resting on one of his hands, and in his semi-consciousness he laid the other on her hair. Then they both fell asleep.

His dreams were a medley of the fancy ball and of some pageant scene in which Iris and Ceres appeared, and there was a rustic dance of maidens and shepherds. Then a murmur as of thunder ran through the scene, followed by darkness. He half woke, in a hot distress, but the soft cheek was still there, his hand still felt the silky curls, and sleep recaptured him.

XII

WHEN Ashe woke up in earnest he was alone. He sprang up in bed and looked round the darkened room, ashamed of his long sleep; but there was no sign of Kitty.

After dressing, he knocked, as usual, at Kitty's door.

"Oh, come in," cried Kitty's lightest voice. "Margaret's here; but if you don't mind her, she won't mind you."

Ashe entered. Kitty, as was her wont four days out of the seven, was breakfasting in bed. Margaret French was beside her with a batch of notes, mostly bills and unanswered invitations, with which she was trying to make Kitty cope.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ashe," Margaret lifted a smiling face. "I had to be out on business for my brother all day, so I thought I'd come early and remind Kitty of some of these tiresome things while there was still a chance of finding her."

"I don't know why guardian angels excuse themselves," said Ashe, as they shook hands.

"Oh, dear, what a lot of them there are!" said Kitty, tossing over the notes with a bored air. "Refuse them all, Margaret; I'm tired to death of dining out."

"Not all, I think," pleaded Margaret. "Here's that nice woman—you remember—who wanted to thank Mr.

The Marriage of William Ashe

Ashe for what he'd done for her son. You promised to dine with her."

"Did I?" Kitty wriggled with annoyance. "Well, then, I suppose we must. What did William do for her? When I ask him to do something for the nicest boys in the world, he won't lift a finger."

"I gave him some introductions in Berlin," laughed Ashe. "What you generally want me to do, Kitty, is to stuff the public service with good-looking idiots. And there I really can't oblige you."

"Every one knows that corruption gets the best men," said Kitty. "Hullo, what's that?" and she lifted a dinner-card, and looked at it strangely.

"My dear Kitty! when did it come?" exclaimed Margaret French, in dismay.

It was a dinner-card, whereby Lord and Lady Parham requested the honor of Mr. and Lady Kitty Ashe's company at dinner, on a date somewhere within the first week of July.

Ashe bent over to look at it.

"I think that came ten days ago," he said, quietly. "I imagined Kitty accepted it."

"I never thought of it from that day to this," said Kitty, who had clasped her hands behind her head and was staring at the ceiling. "Say, please, that"—she spaced out the words deliberately—"Mr. and Lady Kitty Ashe—are unable to accept—Lord and Lady Parham's invitation—etc.—"

"Kitty!" said Margaret, firmly, "there must be a 'regret' and a 'kind.' Think! Ten days! The party is next week!"

"No 'regret,' and no 'kind'!" said Kitty, still staring

The Marriage of William Ashe

overhead. "It's my affair, please, Margaret, altogether. And I'll see the note before it goes, or you'll be putting in civilities."

Margaret, in despair, looked entreatingly at Ashe. He and she had often conspired before this to soften down Kitty's enormities. But he said nothing—made not the smallest sign.

With difficulty Margaret got a few more directions out of Kitty, over whom a shade of sombre taciturnity had now fallen. Then, saying she would write the notes down-stairs and come back, she gathered up her basketful of letters and departed.

As soon as she was alone with Ashe, Kitty took up a novel beside her, and pretended to be absorbed in it.

He hesitated a moment, then he stooped over her and took her hand.

"Why did you come in to visit me, Kitty?" he said, in a low voice.

"I don't know," was her indifferent reply, and her hand pulled itself away, though not with violence.

"I wish I could understand you, Kitty." His tone was not quite steady.

"Well, I don't understand myself!" said Kitty, shortly, reaching out for a bunch of roses that Margaret had just brought her, and burying her face among them.

"Perhaps, if you submitted the problem to me," said Ashe, laughing, "we might be able to thresh it out together!"

He folded his arms and leaned against the foot of the bed, delighting his eyes with the vision of her amid the folds of muslin and lace, and all the costly refinements of pillow and coverlet with which she liked to surround

The Marriage of William Ashe

herself at that hour of the morning. She might have been a French princess of the old régime, receiving her court.

Kitty shook her head. The roses fell idly from her hands, and made bright patches of blush pink about her. Ashe went on:

"Anyway, dear, don't give silly tongues *too* good a handle!"

He threw her a gay comrade's look, as though to say that they both knew the folly of the world, but he perhaps the better, as he was the elder.

"You mean," said Kitty, calmly, "that I am not to talk so much to Geoffrey Cliffe?"

"Is he worth it?" said Ashe. "That's what I want to know—worth the fuss that some people make?"

"It's the fuss and the people that drive one on," said Kitty, under her breath.

"You flatter them too much, darling! Do you think you were quite kind to me last night?—let's put it that way. I looked a precious fool, you know, standing on those steps, while you were keeping old Mother Parham and the whole show waiting!"

She looked at him a moment in silence, at his heightened color and insistent eyes.

"I can't think what made you marry me," she said, slowly.

Ashe laughed, and came nearer.

"And I can't think," he said, in a lower voice, "what made you come—if you weren't a little bit sorry—and lean your dear head against me like that, last night."

"I wasn't sorry—I couldn't sleep," was her quick reply, while her eyes strove to keep up their war with his.

The Marriage of William Ashe

A knock was heard at the door. Ashe moved hastily away. Kitty's maid entered.

"I was to tell you, sir, that your breakfast was ready. And Lady Tranmore's servant has brought this note."

Ashe took it and thrust it into his pocket.

"Get my things ready, please," said Kitty to her maid. Ashe felt himself dismissed and went.

As soon as he was gone, Kitty sprang out of bed, threw on a dressing-gown, and ran across to Blanche, who was bending over a chest of drawers. "Why did you say those foolish things to me yesterday?" she demanded, taking the girl impetuously by the arm, and so startling her that she nearly dropped the clothes she held.

"They weren't foolish, my lady," said Blanche, sullenly, with averted eyes.

"They were!" cried Kitty. "Of course, I'm a vixen—I always was. But you know, Blanche, I'm not always as bad as I have been lately. Very soon I shall be quite charming again—you'll see!"

"I dare say, my lady." Blanche went on sorting and arranging the *lingerie* she had taken out of the drawer.

Kitty sat down beside her, nursing a bare foot which was crossed over the other.

"You know how I abused you about my hair, Blanche? Well, Mrs. Alcot said, that very night, she never saw it so well done. She thought it must be Pierrefitte's best man. Wasn't it hellish of me? I knew quite well you'd done it beautifully."

The maid said nothing, but a tear fell on one of Kitty's night-dresses.

"And you remember the green garibaldi—last week?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

I just loathed it—because you'd forgotten that little black rosette."

"No!" said Blanche, looking up; "your ladyship had never ordered it."

"I did—I did! But never mind. Two of my friends have wanted to copy it, Blanche. They wouldn't believe it was done by a maid. They said it had such style. One of them would engage you to-morrow if you really want to go—"

A silence.

"But you won't go, Blanchie, will you?" said Kitty's silver voice. "I'm a horrid fiend, but I did get Mr. Ashe to help your young man—and I did care about your poor brother—and—and—" she stroked the girl's arm—"I do look rather nice when I'm dressed, don't I? You wouldn't like a great gawk to dress, would you?"

"I'm sure I don't want to leave your ladyship," said the girl, choking. "But I can't have no more—"

"No more ructions?" said Kitty, meditating. "H'm, of course that's serious, because I'm made so. Well, now, look here, Blanchie, you won't give me warning again for a fortnight, whatever I do, mind. And if by then I'm past praying for, you may. And I'll import a Russian—or a Choctaw—who won't understand when I call her names. Is that a bargain, Blanchie?"

The maid hesitated.

"Just a fortnight!" said Kitty, in her most seductive tones.

"Very well, my lady."

Kitty jumped up, waltzed round the room, the white silk skirts of her dressing-gown floating far and wide,

The Marriage of William Ashe

then thrust her feet into her slippers, and began to dress as though nothing had happened.

But when her toilette was accomplished, Kitty having dismissed her maid, sat for some time in front of her mirror in a brown study.

"What is the matter with me?" she thought. "William is an angel, and I love him. And I can't do what he wants—I *can't!*" She drew a long, troubled breath. The lips of the face reflected in the glass were dry and colorless, the eyes had a strange, shrinking expression. "People *are* possessed—I know they are. They can't help themselves. I began this to punish Mary—and now—when I don't see Geoffrey, everything is odious and dreary. I can't care for anything. Of course, I ought to care for William's politics. I expect I've done him harm—I know I have. What's wrong with me?"

But suddenly, in the very midst of her self-examination, the emotion and excitement that she had felt of late in her long conversations with Cliffe returned upon her, filling her at once with poignant memory and a keen expectation to which she yielded herself as a wild sea-bird to the rocking of the sea. They had started—those conversations—from her attempt to penetrate the secret history of the man whose poems had filled her with a thrilling sense of feelings and passions beyond her ken—untrodden regions, full, no doubt, of shadow and of poison, but infinitely alluring to one whose nature was best summed up in the two words, curiosity and daring. She had not found it quite easy. Cliffe, as we know, had resented the levity of her first attempt. But when she renewed it, more seriously and sweetly, com-

The Marriage of William Ashe

binning with it a number of subtle flatteries, the flattery of her beauty and her position, of the private interest she could not help showing in the man who was her husband's public antagonist, and of an admiration for his poems which was not so much mere praise as an actual covetous sharing in them, a making their ideas and their music her own—Cliffe could not in the end resist her. After all, so far, she only asked him to talk of himself, and for a man of his type the process is the very breath of his being, the stimulus and liberation of all his powers.

So that before they knew they were in the midst of the most burning subjects of human discussion—at first in a manner comparatively veiled and general, then with the sharpest personal reference to Cliffe's own story, as the intimacy between them grew. Jealousy, suffering, the "hard cases" of passion—why men are selfish and exacting, why women mislead and torment—the ugly waste and crudity of death—it was among these great themes they found themselves. Death above all—it was to a thought of death that Cliffe's harsh face owed its chief spell perhaps in Kitty's eyes. A woman had died for love of him, crushed by his jealousy and her own self-scorn. So Kitty had been told; and Cliffe's tortured vanity would not deny it. How could she have cared so much? That was the puzzle.

But this vicarious relation had now passed into a relation of her own. Cliffe was to Kitty a problem—and a problem which, beyond a certain point, defied her. The element of sex, of course, entered in, but only as intensifying the contrasts and mysteries of imagination. And he made her feel these contrasts and mysteries as she had never yet felt them; and so he

The Marriage of William Ashe

enlarged the world for her, he plunged her, if only by contact with his own bitter and irritable genius, into new regions of sentiment and feeling. For in spite of the vulgar elements in him there were also elements of genius. The man was a poet and a thinker, though he were at the same time, in some sense, an adventurer. His mind was stored with eloquent and beautiful imagery, the poetry of others, and poetry of his own. He could pursue the meanest personal objects in an unscrupulous way; but he had none the less passed through a wealth of tragic circumstance; he had been face to face with his own soul in the wilds of the earth; he had met every sort of physical danger with contempt; and his arrogant, imperious temper was of the kind which attracts many women, especially, perhaps, women physically small and intellectually fearless, like Kitty, who feel in it a challenge to their power and their charm.

His society, then, had in these six weeks become, for Kitty, a passion—a passion of the imagination. For the man himself, she would probably have said that she felt more repulsion than anything else. But it was a repulsion that held her, because of the constant sense of reaction, of on-rushing life, which it excited in herself.

Add to these the elements of mischief and defiance in the situation, the snatching him from Mary, her enemy and slanderer, the defiance of Lady Grosville and all other hypocritical tyrants, the pride of dragging at her chariot wheels a man whom most people courted even when they loathed him, who enjoyed, moreover, an astonishing reputation abroad, especially in that France which Kitty adored, as a kind of modern Byron, the only

The Marriage of William Ashe

Englishman who could still display in public the "pageant of a bleeding heart," without making himself ridiculous, and perhaps enough has been heaped together to explain the infatuation that now, like a wild spring gust on a shining lake, was threatening to bring Kitty's light bark into dangerous waters.

"I don't care for him," she said to herself, as she sat thinking alone, "but I must see him—I *will*! And I will talk to him as I please, and where I please!"

Her small frame stiffened under the obstinacy of her resolution. Kitty's will at a moment of this kind was a fatality—so strong was it, and so irrational.

Meanwhile, down-stairs, Ashe himself was wrestling with another phase of the same situation. Lady Tranmore's note had said: "I shall be with you almost immediately after you receive this, as I want to catch you before you go to the Foreign Office."

Accordingly, they were in the library, Ashe on the defensive, Lady Tranmore nervous, embarrassed, and starting at a sound. Both of them watched the door. Both looked for and dreaded the advent of Kitty.

"Dear William," said his mother at last, stretching her hand across a small table which stood between them and laying it on her son's, "you'll forgive me, won't you?—even if I do seem to you prudish and absurd. But I am afraid you *ought* to tell Kitty some of the unkind things people are saying! You know I've tried, and she wouldn't listen to me. And you ought to beg her—yes, William, indeed you ought!—not to give any further occasion for them."

She looked at him anxiously, full of that timidity

The Marriage of William Ashe

which haunts the deepest and tenderest affections. She had just given him to read a letter from Lady Grosville to herself. Ashe ran through it, then laid it down with a gesture of scorn.

"Kitty apparently enjoyed a moonlight walk with Cliffe. Why shouldn't she? Lady Grosville thinks the moon was made to sleep by—other people don't."

"But, William!—at night—when everybody had gone to bed—escaping from the house—they two alone!"

Lady Tranmore looked at him entreatingly, as though driven to protest, and yet hating the sound of her own words.

Ashe laughed. He was smoking with an air so nonchalant that his mother's heart sank. For she divined that criticism in the society around her which she was never allowed to hear. Was it true, indeed, that his natural indolence could not rouse itself even to the defence of a young wife's reputation?

"All the fault of the Grosvilles," said Ashe, after a moment, lighting another cigarette, "in shutting up their great heavy house, and drawing their great heavy curtains on a May night, when all reasonable people want to be out-of-doors. My dear mother, what's the good of paying any attention to what people like Lady Grosville say of people like Kitty? You might as well expect Deborah to hit it off with Ariel!"

"William, don't laugh!" said his mother, in distress. "Geoffrey Cliffe is not a man to be trusted. You and I know that of old. He is a boaster, and—"

"And a liar!" said Ashe, quietly. "Oh! I know that."

"And yet he has this power over women—one ought

The Marriage of William Ashe

to look it in the face. William, dearest William!" she leaned over and clasped his hand close in both hers, "do persuade Kitty to go away from London now—at once!"

"Kitty won't go," said Ashe, quietly. "I am sorry, dear mother. I hate that you should be worried. But there's the fact. Kitty won't go!"

"Then use your authority," said Lady Tranmore.

"I have none."

"William!" Ashe rose from his seat, and began to walk up and down. His aspect of competence and dignity, as of a man already accustomed to command and destined to a high experience, had never been more marked than at the very moment of this helpless utterance. His mother looked at him with mingled admiration and amazement.

Presently he paused beside her.

"I should like you to understand me, mother. I cannot fight with Kitty. Before I asked her to marry me, I made up my mind to that. I knew then and I know now that nothing but disaster could come of it. She must be free, and I shall not attempt to coerce her."

"Or to protect her!" cried his mother.

"As to that, I shall do what I can. But I clearly foresaw when we married that we should scandalize a good many of the weaker brethren."

He smiled, but, as it seemed to his mother, with some effort.

"William! as a public man—"

He interrupted her.

"If I can be both Kitty's husband and a public man, well and good. If not, then I shall be—"

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Kitty's husband?" cried Lady Tranmore, with an accent of bitterness, almost of sarcasm, of which she instantly repented her. She changed her tone.

"It is, of course, Kitty, first and foremost, who is concerned in your public position," she said, more gently. "Dearest William—she is so young still—she probably doesn't quite understand, in spite of her great cleverness. But she *does* care—she *must* care—and she ought to know what slight things may sometimes affect a man's prospects and future in this country."

Ashe said nothing. He turned on his heel and resumed his pacing. Lady Tranmore looked at him in perplexity.

"William, I heard a rumor last night—"

He held his cigarette suspended.

"Lord Crashaw told me that the resignations would certainly be in the papers this week, and that the ministry would go on—after a rearrangement of posts. Is it true?"

Ashe resumed his cigarette.

"True—as to the facts—so far as I know. As to the date, Lord Crashaw knows, I think, no more than I do. It may be this week, it may be next month."

"Then I hear—thank goodness I never see her," Elizabeth went on, reluctantly—"that that dreadful woman, Lady Parham, is more infuriated than ever—"

"With Kitty? Let her be! It really doesn't matter an old shoe, either to Kitty or me."

"She can be a most bitter enemy, William. And she certainly influences Lord Parham."

Ashe smoked and smiled. Lady Tranmore saw that his pride, too, had been aroused, and that here he was likely to prove as obstinate as Kitty.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"I wish I could get her out of my mind!" she sighed. Ashe glanced at her kindly.

"I daresay we shall hold our own. Xanthippe is not beloved, and I don't believe Parham will let her interfere with what he thinks best for the party. Will it pay to put me in the cabinet or not?—that's what he'll ask. I shall be strongly backed, too, by most of our papers."

A number of thoughts ran through Lady Tranmore's brain. With her long experience of London, she knew well what the sudden lowering of a man's "consideration"—to use a French word—at a critical moment may mean. A cooling of the general regard—a breath of detraction coming no one knows whence—and how soon new claims emerge, and the indispensable of yesterday becomes the negligible of to-day!

But even if she could have brought herself to put any of these anxieties into words, she had no opportunity. Kitty's voice was in the hall; the handle turned, and she ran in.

"William! Ah!—I didn't know mother was here."

She went up to Elizabeth, and lightly kissed that lady's cheek.

"Good-morning. William, I just came to tell you that I may be late for dinner, so perhaps you had better dine at the House. I am going on the river."

"Are you?" said Ashe, gathering up his papers. "Wish I was."

"Are you going with the Crashaw's party?" asked Elizabeth. "I know they have one."

"Oh, dear, no!" said Kitty. "I hate a crowd on the river. I am going with Geoffrey Cliffe."

The Marriage of William Ashe

Ashe bent over his desk. Lady Tranmore's eyebrows went up, and she could not restrain the word:

"Alone?"

"*Naturellement!*" laughed Kitty. "He reads me French poetry, and we talk French. We let Madeleine Alcot come once, but her accent was so shocking that Geoffrey wouldn't have her again!"

Lady Tranmore flushed deeply. The "Geoffrey" seemed to her intolerable. Kitty, arrayed in the freshest of white gowns, walked away to the farther end of the library to consult a *Bradshaw*. Elizabeth, looking up, caught her son's eyes—and the mingled humor and vexation in them, wherewith he appealed to her, as it were, to see the whole silly business as he himself did. Lady Tranmore felt a moment's strong reaction. Had she indeed been making a foolish fuss about nothing?

Yet the impression left by the miserable meditations of her night was still deep enough to make her say—with just a signal from eye and lips, so that Kitty neither saw nor heard—"Don't let her go!"

Ashe shook his head. He moved towards the door, and stood there despatch-box in hand, throwing a last look at his wife.

"Don't be late, Kitty—or I shall be nervous. I don't trust Cliffe on the river. And please make it a rule that, in locks, he stops quoting French poetry."

Kitty turned round, startled and apparently annoyed by his tone.

"He is an excellent oar," she said, shortly.

"Is he? At Oxford we tried him for the Torpids—" Ashe's shrug completed his remark. Then, still disre-

The Marriage of William Ashe

garding another imploring look from Lady Tranmore, he left the room.

Kitty had flushed angrily. The belittling, malicious note in Ashe's manner had been clear enough. She braced herself against it, and Lady Tranmore's chance was lost. For when, summoning all her courage, and quite uncertain whether her son would approve or blame her, Elizabeth approached her daughter-in-law affectionately, trying in timid and apologetic words to unburden her own heart and reach Kitty's, Kitty met her with one of those outbursts of temper that women like Elizabeth Tranmore cannot cope with. Their moral recoil is too great. It is the recoil of the spiritual aristocrat; and between them and the children of passion the links are few, the antagonism eternal.

She left the house, pale, dignified, the tears in her eyes. Kitty ran up-stairs, humming an air from "Faust," as though she would tear it to pieces, put on a flame-colored hat that gave a still further note of extravagance to her costume, ordered a hansom, and drove away.

Whether Kitty got much joy out of the three weeks which followed must remain uncertain. She had certainly routed Mary Lyster, if there were any final satisfaction in that. Mary had left town early, and was now in Somersetshire helping her father to entertain, in order, said the malicious, to put the best face possible on a defeat which this time had been serious. And instead of devoting himself to the wooing of a northern constituency where he had been adopted as the candidate of a new Tory group, Cliffe lingered obstinately in town,

The Marriage of William Ashe

endangering his chances and angering his supporters. Kitty's influence over his actions was, indeed, patent and undenied, whatever might be the general opinion as to her effect upon his heart. Some of Kitty's intimates at any rate were convinced that his absorption in the matter was by now, to say the least, no less eager and persistent than hers. At this point it was by no means still a relation of flattery on Kitty's side and a pleased self-love on his. It had become a duel of two personalities, or rather two imaginations. In fact, as Kitty, learning the ways of his character, became more proudly mistress of herself and him, his interest in her visibly increased. It might almost be said that she was beginning to hold back, and he for the first time pursued.

Once or twice he had the grace to ask himself where it was all to end. Was he in love with her? An absurd question! He had paid his heavy tribute to passion if any man ever had, and had already hung up his votive tablet and his garments wet from shipwreck in the temple of the god. But it seemed that, after all said and done, the society of a woman, young, beautiful, and capricious, was still the best thing which the day—the London day, at all events—had to bring. At Kitty's suggestion he was collecting and revising a new volume of his poems. He and she quarrelled over them perpetually. Sometimes there was not a line which pleased her; and then, again, she would delight him with the homage of sudden tears in her brown eyes, and a praise so ardent and so refined that it almost compared—as Kitty meant it should—with that of the dead. In the shaded drawing-room, where every detail pleased his taste, Cliffe's harsh voice thundered or murmured verse which was

The Marriage of William Ashe

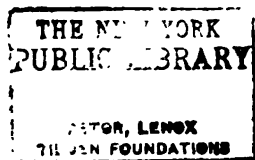
beyond dispute the verse of a poet, and thereby sensuous and passionate. Ostensibly the verse concerned another woman; in truth, the slight and lovely figure sitting on the farther side of the flowered hearth, the delicate head bent, the finger-tips lightly joined, entered day by day more directly into the consciousness of the poet. What harm? All he asked was intelligence and response. As to her heart, he made no claim upon it whatever. Ashe, by-the-way, was clearly not jealous—a sensible attitude, considering Lady Kitty's strength of will.

Into Cliffe's feeling towards Ashe there entered, indeed, a number of evil things, determined by quite other relations between the two men—the relation of the man who wants to the man who has, of the man beaten by the restlessness of ambition to the man who possesses all that the other desires, and affects to care nothing about it—of the combatant who fights with rage to the combatant who fights with a smile. Cliffe could often lash himself into fury by the mere thought of Ashe's opportunities and Ashe's future, combined with the belief that Ashe's mood towards himself was either contemptuous or condescending. And it was at such moments that he would fling himself with most resource into the establishing of his ascendancy over Kitty.

The two men met when they did meet—which was but seldom—on perfectly civil terms. If Ashe arrived unexpectedly from the House in the late afternoon to find Cliffe in the drawing-room reading aloud to Kitty, the politics of the moment provided talk enough till Cliffe could decently take his departure. He never dined with them alone, Kitty having no mind



"CLIFFE IN THE DRAWING-ROOM READING ALOUD TO KITTY"



The Marriage of William Ashe

whatever for the discomforts of such a party; and in the evenings when he and Kitty met at a small number of houses, where the flirtation was watched nightly with a growing excitement, Ashe's duties kept him at Westminster, and there was nothing to hinder that flow of small and yet significant incident by which situations of this kind are developed.

Ashe set his teeth. He had made up his mind finally that it was a plague and a tyranny which would pass, and could only be magnified by opposition. But his temper suffered. There were many small quarrels during these weeks between himself and Kitty, quarrels which betrayed the tension produced in him by what was—in essentials—an iron self-control. But they made daily life a sordid, unlovely thing, and they gave Kitty an excuse for saying that William was as violent as herself, and for seeking refuge in the exaltations of feeling or of fancy provided by Cliffe's companionship.

Perhaps of all the persons in the drama, Lady Tranmore was the most to be pitied. She sat at home, having no heart to go to Hill Street, and more tied indeed than usual by the helpless illness of her husband. Never, in all these days, did Ashe miss his daily visit to his father. He would come in, apparently his handsome, good-humored self, ready to read aloud for twenty minutes, or merely to sit in silence by the sick man, his eyes making affectionate answer every now and then to the dumb looks of Lord Tranmore. Only his mother sought and found that slight habitual contraction of the brow which bore witness to some equally persistent disquiet of the mind. But he kept her at arm's-length on the subject

The Marriage of William Ashe

of Kitty. She dared not tell him any of the gossip which reached her.

Meanwhile these weeks meant for her not only the dread of disgrace, but the disappointment of a just ambition, the humiliation of her mother's pride. The political crisis approached rapidly, and Ashe's name was less and less to the front. Lady Parham was said to be taking an active part in the consultations and intrigues that surrounded her husband, and it was well known by now to the inner circle that her hostility to the Ashes, and her insistence on the fact that cabinet ministers must be beyond reproach, and their wives persons to whose houses the party can go without demeaning themselves, were likely to be of importance. Moreover, Ashe's success in the House of Commons was no longer what it had been earlier in the session. The party papers had cooled. Elizabeth Tranmore felt a blight in the air. Yet William, with his position in the country, his high ability, and the social weight belonging to the heir of the Tranmore peerage and estates, was surely not a person to be lightly ignored! Would Lord Parham venture it?

At last the resignations of the two ministers were in the *Times*; there were communications between the Queen and the Premier, and London plunged with such ardor as is possible in late July into the throes of cabinet-making. Kitty insisted petulantly that of course all would be well; William's services were far too great to be ignored; though Lord Parham would no doubt slight him if he dared. But the party and the public would see to that. The days were gone by when vulgar old women like Lady Parham could have any real in-

The Marriage of William Ashe

fluence on political appointments. Otherwise, who would condescend to politics?

Ashe brought her amusing reports from the House or the clubs of the various intrigues going on, and, as to his own chances, refused to discuss them seriously. Once or twice when Kitty, in his presence, insisted on speaking of them to some political intimate, only to provoke an evident embarrassment, Ashe suffered the tortures which proud men know. But he never lost his tone of light detachment, and the conclusion of his friends was that, as usual, "Ashe didn't care a button."

The hours passed, however, and no sign came from the Prime Minister. Everything was still uncertain; but Ashe had realized that at least he was not to be taken into the inner counsels of the party. The hopes and fears, the heartburnings and rivalries of such a state of things are proverbial. Ashe wondered impatiently when the beastly business would be over, and he could get off to Scotland for the air and sport of which he was badly in need.

It was a Friday, in the first week of August. Ashe was leaving the Athenæum with another member of the House when a newspaper boy rushing along with a fresh bundle of papers passed them with the cry, "New cabinet complete! Official list!" They caught him up, snatched a paper, and read. Two men of middle age, conspicuous in Parliament, but not hitherto in office, one of them of great importance as a lawyer, the other as a military critic, were appointed, the one to the Home Office, the other to the Ministry of War; there had been some shuffling in the minor offices, and a new

The Marriage of William Ashe

Privy Seal had dawned upon the world. For the rest, all was as before, and in the formal list the name of the Honorable William Travers Ashe still remained attached to the Under-Secretaryship for Foreign Affairs.

Ashe's friend shrugged his shoulders, and avoided looking at his companion. "A bomb-shell, to begin with," he said; "otherwise the flattest thing out."

"On the contrary," laughed Ashe. "Parham has shown a wonderful amount of originality. If you and I are taken by surprise, what will the public be? And they'll like him all the better—you'll see. He has shown courage and gone for new men—that's what they'll say. *Vive* Parham! Well, good-bye. Now, please the Lord, we shall get off—and I may be among the grouse this day week."

He stopped on his way out of the club to discuss the list with the men coming in. He was conscious that some would have avoided him. But he had no mind to be avoided, and his caustic, good-humored talk carried off the situation. Presently he was walking homeward, swinging his stick with the gayety of a school-boy expecting the holidays.

As he mounted St. James's Street a carriage descended. Ashe mechanically took off his hat to the half-recognized face within, and as he did so perceived the icy bow and triumphant eyes of Lady Parham.

He hurried along, fighting a curious sensation, as of a physical bruising and beating. The streets were full of the news, and he was stopped many times by mere acquaintances to talk of it. In Savile Row he turned into a small literary club of which he was a member, and wrote a letter to his mother. In very affectionate

The Marriage of William Ashe

and amusing terms it begged her not to take the disappointment too seriously. "I think I won't come round to-night. But expect me first thing to-morrow."

He sent the note by messenger and walked home. When he reached Hill Street it was close on eight. Outside the house he suddenly asked himself what line he was going to take with Kitty.

Kitty, however, was not at home. As far as he could remember she had gone coaching with the Alcots into Surrey, Geoffrey Cliffe, of course, being of the party. Presently, indeed, he discovered a hasty line from her on his study table, to say that they were to dine at Richmond, and "Madeleine" supposed they would get home between ten and eleven. Not a word more. Like all strong men, Ashe despised the meditations of self-pity. But the involuntary reflection that on this evening of humiliation Kitty was not with him—did not apparently care enough about his affairs and his ambitions to be with him—brought with it a soreness which had to be endured.

The next moment, he was inclined to be glad of her absence. Such things, especially in the first shock of them, are best faced alone. If, indeed, there were any shock in the matter. He had for some time had his own shrewd previsions, and he was aware of a strong inner belief that his defeat was but temporary.

Probably, when she had time to remember such trifles, Kitty would feel the shock more than he did. Lady Parham had certainly won this round of the rubber!

He settled to his solitary dinner, but in the middle of it put down Kitty's Aberdeen terrier, which, for want of other company, he was stuffing atrociously, and ran up

The Marriage of William Ashe

to the nursery. The nurse was at her supper, and Harry lay fast asleep, a pretty little fellow, flushed into a semblance of health, and with a strong look of Kitty.

Ashe bent down and put his whiskered cheek to the boy's. "Never mind, old man!" he murmured, "better luck next time!"

Then raising himself with a smile, he looked affectionately at the child, noticed with satisfaction his bright color and even breathing, and stole away.

He ran through the comments of the evening papers on the new cabinet list, finding in only two or three any reference to himself, then threw them aside, and seized upon a pile of books and reviews that were lying on his table. He carried them up to the drawing-room, hesitated between a theological review and a new edition of Horace, and finally plunged with avidity into the theological review.

For some two hours he sat enthralled by an able summary of the chief Tübingen positions; then suddenly threw himself back with a stretch and a laugh.

"Wonder what the chap's doing that's got my post! Not reading theology, I'll be bound."

The reflection followed that were he at that moment Home Secretary and in the cabinet, he would not probably be reading it either—nor left to a solitary evening. Friends would be dropping in to congratulate—the modern equivalent of the old "turba clientium."

As his thoughts wandered, the drawing-room clock struck eleven. He rose, astonished and impatient. Where was Kitty?

By midnight she had not arrived. Ashe heard the butler moving in the hall and summoned him.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"There may have been some mishap to the coach, Wilson. Perhaps they have stayed at Richmond. Anyway, go to bed. I'll wait for her ladyship."

He returned to his arm-chair and his books, but soon drew Kitty's *couvre-pied* over him and went to sleep.

When he awoke, daylight was in the room. "What has happened to them?" he asked himself, in a sudden anxiety.

And amid the silence of the dawn he paced up and down, a prey for the first time to black depression. He was besieged by memories of the last two months, their anxieties and quarrels—the waste of time and opportunity—the stabs to feeling and self-respect. Once he found himself groaning aloud, "Kitty! Kitty!"

When this huge, distracting London was left behind, when he had her to himself amid the Scotch heather and birch, should he find her again—conquer her again—as in the exquisite days after their marriage? He thought of Cliffe with a kind of proud torment, disdaining to be jealous or afraid. Kitty had amused herself—had tested her freedom, his patience, to the utmost. Might she now be content, and reward him a little for a self-control, a philosophy, which had not been easy!

A French novel on Kitty's little table drew his attention. He thought not without a discomfortable humor of what a French husband would have made of a similar situation—recalling the remark of a French acquaintance on some case illustrating the freedom of English wives. "Il y a un élément turc dans le mari français, qui nous rendrait ces mœurs-là impossibles!"

À la bonne heure! Let the Frenchman keep up his seraglio standards as he pleased. An Englishman trusts

The Marriage of William Ashe

both his wife and his daughter—scorns, indeed, to consider whether he trusts them or no! And who comes worst off? Not the Englishman—if, at least, we are to believe the French novel on the French *ménage!*

He paced thus up and down for an hour, defying his unseen critics—his mother—his own heart.

Then he went to bed and slept a little. But with the post next morning there was no letter from Kitty. There might be a hundred explanations of that. Yet he felt a sudden need of caution.

"Her ladyship comes up this morning by train," he said to Wilson, as though reading from a note. "There seems to have been a mishap."

Then he took a hansom and drove to the Alcots.

"Is Mrs. Alcot at home?" he asked the butler. "Can I have an answer to this note?"

"Mrs. Alcot has been in her room since yesterday morning, sir. She was taken ill just before the coach was coming round, and the horses had to be sent back. But the doctor last night hoped it would be nothing serious."

Ashe turned and went home. Then Kitty was not with Madeleine Alcot—not on the coach! Where was she, and with whom?

He shut himself into his library and fell to wondering, in bewilderment, what he had better do. A tide of rage and agony was mounting within him. How to master it—and keep his brain clear!

He was sitting in front of his writing-table staring at the floor, his hands hanging before him, when the door opened and shut. He turned. There, with her back to the door, stood Kitty. Her aspect startled him to his

The Marriage of William Ashe

feet. She looked at him, trembling—her little face haggard and white, with a touch of something in it which had blurred its youth.

“William!” She put both her hands to her breast, as though to support herself. Then she flew forward. “William! I have done nothing wrong—nothing—nothing! William—look at me!”

He sternly put out his hand, protecting himself.

“Where have you been?” he said, in a low voice—
“and with whom?”

Kitty fell into a chair and burst into wild tears.

XIII

THERE was silence for a few moments except for Kitty's crying. Ashe still stood beside his writing-table, his hand resting upon it, his eyes on Kitty. Once or twice he began to speak, and stopped. At last he said, with obvious difficulty:

"It's cruel to keep me waiting, Kitty."

"I sent you a telegram first thing this morning." The voice was choked and passionate.

"I never got it."

"Horrid little fiend!" cried Kitty, sitting up and dashing back her hair from her tear-stained cheeks. "I gave a boy half a crown this morning to be at the station with it by eight o'clock. And I couldn't possibly either write or telegraph last night—it was too late."

"Where were you?" said Ashe, slowly. "I went to the Alcots' this morning, and—"

"—the butler told you Madeleine was in bed? So she is. She was ill yesterday morning. There was no coach and no party. I went with Geoffrey."

Kitty held herself erect; her eyes, from which the tears were involuntarily dropping, were fixed on her husband.

"Of course I guessed that," said Ashe.

"It was Geoffrey brought me the news—here, just as I was starting to go to the Alcots'. Then he said he had

The Marriage of William Ashe

something to read me—and it would be delicious to go to Pangbourne—spend the day on the river—and come back from Windsor—at night—by train. And I had a horrid headache—and it was so hot—and you were at the office”—her lip quivered—“and I wanted to hear Geoffrey’s poems—and so—”

She interrupted herself, and once more broke down—hiding her face against the chair. But the next moment she felt herself roughly drawn forward, as Ashe knelt beside her.

“Kitty!—look at me! That man behaved to you like a villain?”

She looked up—she saw the handsome, good-humored face transformed—and wrenched herself away.

“He did,” she said, bitterly—“like a villain.” She began to twist and torment her handkerchief as Ashe had seen her do once before, the small white teeth pressed upon the lower lip—then suddenly she turned upon him—

“I suppose you want me to tell you the story?”

All Kitty in the words! Her frankness, her daring, and the impatient, realistic tone she was apt to impose upon emotion—they were all there.

Ashe rose and began to walk up and down.

“Tell me your part in it,” he said, at last—“and as little of that fellow as may be.”

Kitty was silent. Ashe, looking at her, saw a curious shade of reverie, a kind of dreamy excitement steal over her face.

“Go on, Kitty!” he said, sharply. Then, restraining himself, he added, with all his natural courtesy—“I beg your pardon, Kitty, but the sooner we get through with this the better.”

The Marriage of William Ashe

The mist in which her expression had been for a moment wrapped fell away. She flushed deeply.

"I told you I had done nothing vile!" she said, passionately. "Did you believe me?"

Their eyes met in a shock of challenge and reply.

"Those things are not to be asked between you and me," he said, with vehemence, and he held out his hand. She just touched it—proudly. Then she drew a long breath.

"The day was—just like other days. He read me his poems—in a cool place we found under the bank. I thought he was rather absurd now and then—and different from what he had been. He talked of our going away—and his not seeing me—and how lonely he was. And of course I was awfully sorry for him. But it was all right till—"

She paused and looked at Ashe.

"You remember the inn near Hamel Weir—a few miles from Windsor—that lonely little place."

Ashe nodded.

"We dined there. Afterwards we were to row to Windsor and come home by a train about ten. We finished dinner early. By-the-way, there were two other people there—Lady Edith Manley and her boy. They had rowed down from somewhere—"

"Did Lady Edith—"

"Yes—she spoke to me. She was going back to town—to the Holland House party—"

"Where she probably met mother?"

"She did meet her!" cried Kitty. She pointed to a letter which she had thrown down as she entered. "Your mother sent round this note to me this morn-

The Marriage of William Ashe

ing—to ask when I should be at home. And Wilson sent word— There! Of course I know she thinks I'm capable of anything."

She looked at him, defiant, but very miserable and pale.

"Go on, please," said Ashe.

"We finished dinner early. There was a field behind the inn, and then a wood. We strolled into the wood, and then Geoffrey—well, he went mad! He—"

She bit her lip fiercely, struggling for composure—and words.

"He proposed to you to throw me over?" said Ashe, as white as she.

With a sudden gesture she held out her arms—like a piteous child.

"Oh! don't stand there—and look at me like that—I can't bear it."

Ashe came—unwillingly. She perceived the reluctance, and with a flaming face she motioned him back, while she controlled herself enough to pour out her story. Presently Ashe was able to reconstruct with tolerable clearness what had occurred. Cliffe, intoxicated by the long day of intimacy and of solitude, by Kitty's beauty and Kitty's folly, aware that parting was near at hand, and trusting to the wildness of Kitty's temperament, had suddenly assumed the language of the lover—and a lover by no means uncertain of his ultimate answer. So long as they understood each other—that, indeed, for the present, was all he asked. But she must know that she had broken off his marriage with Mary Lyster, and reopened in his nature all the old founts of passion and of storm. It had been her sov-

The Marriage of William Ashe

ereign will that he should love her; it had been achieved. For her sake—knowing himself for the seared and criminal being that he was—for Ashe's sake—he had tried to resist her spell. In vain. A fatal fusion of their two natures—imagination—sympathies—had come about. Each was interpenetrated by the other; and retreat was impossible.

A kind of sombre power, indeed—the power of the poet and the dreamer—seemed to have spoken from Cliffe's strange wooing. He had taken no particular pains to flatter her, or to conceal his original hesitation. He put her own action in a hard, almost a brutal light. It was plain that he thought she had treated her husband badly; that he warned her of a future of treachery and remorse. At the same time he let her see that he could not doubt but that she would face it. They still had the last justifying cards in their hands—passion, and the courage to go where passion leads. When those were played, they might look each other and the world in the face. Till then they were but triflers—mean souls—fit neither for heaven nor for hell.

Ashe's whole being was soon in a tumult of rage under the sting of this report, as he was able to piece it out from Kitty. But he kept his self-command, and by dint of it he presently arrived at some notion of her own share in the scene. Horror, recoil, disavowal—a wild resentment of the charges heaped upon her, of the pitiless interpretation of her behavior which broke from those harsh lips, of the incredulity passing into something like contempt with which Cliffe had endured her wrath and received her protestations—then a blind flight through the fields to the little wayside station,

The Marriage of William Ashe

where she hoped to catch the last train; the arrival and departure of the train while she was still half a mile from the line, and her shelter at a cottage for the night; these things stood out plainly, whatever else remained in obscurity. How far she had provoked her own fate, and how far even now she was delivered from the morbid spell of Cliffe's personality, Ashe would not allow himself to ask. As she neared the end of her story, it was as though the great tempest wave in which she had been struggling died down, and with a merciful rush bore him to a shore of deliverance. She was there beside him; and she was still his own.

He had been leaning over the side of a chair, his chin on his hand, his eyes fixed upon her, while she told her tale. It ended in a burst of self-pity, as she remembered her collapse in the cottage, the impossibility of finding any carriage in the small hamlet of which it made part, the faint weariness of the night—

"I never slept," she said, piteously. "I got up at eight for the first train, and now I feel"—she fell back in her chair, and whispered desolately with shut eyes—"as if I should like to die!"

Ashe knelt down beside her.

"It's my fault, too, Kitty. I ought to have held you with a stronger hand. I hated quarrelling with you. But—oh, my dear, my dear—"

She met the cry in silence, the tears running over her cheeks. Roughly, impetuously, he gathered her in his arms and kissed her, as though he would once more re-knit and reconsecrate the bond between them. She lay passively against him, the tangle of her fair hair spread over his shoulder—too frail and too exhausted for response.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"This won't do," he said, presently, disengaging himself; "you must have some food and rest. Then we'll think what shall be done."

She roused herself suddenly as he went to the door.

"Why aren't you at the Foreign Office?"

"I sent a message early. Lawson came"—Lawson was his private secretary—"but I must go down in an hour."

"William!"

Kitty had raised herself, and her eyes shone large and startled in the small, tear-stained face.

"Yes." He paused a moment.

"William, is the list out?"

"Yes."

Kitty tottered to her feet.

"Is it all right?"

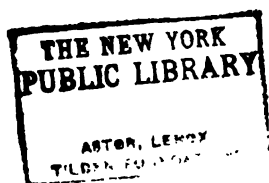
"I suppose so," he said, slowly. "It doesn't affect me."

And then, without waiting, he went into the hall and closed the door behind him. He wrote a note to the Foreign Office to say that he should not be at the office till the afternoon, and that important papers were to be sent up to him. Then he told Wilson to bring wine and sandwiches into the library for Lady Kitty, who had been detained by an accident on the river the night before, and was much exhausted. No visitors were to be admitted, except, of course, Lady Tranmore or Miss French.

When he returned to the library he found Kitty with crimson cheeks, her hands locked behind her; walking up and down. As soon as she saw him she motioned to him imperiously.



" HE GATHERED HER IN HIS ARMS "



The Marriage of William Ashe

"Shut the door, William. I have something very important to say to you."

He obeyed her, and she walked up to him deliberately. He saw the fluttering of her heart beneath her white dress—the crushed, bedraggled dress, which still in its soft elegance, its small originalities, spoke Kitty from head to foot. But her manner was quite calm and collected.

"William, we must separate! You must send me away."

He started.

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. It is—it is intolerable—that I should ruin your life like this."

"Don't, please, exaggerate, Kitty! There is no question of ruin. I shall make my way when the time comes, and Lady Parham will have nothing to say to it!"

"No! Nothing will ever go well—while I'm there—like a millstone round your neck. William"—she came closer to him—"take my advice—do it! I warned you when you married me. And now you see—it was true."

"You foolish child," he answered, slowly, "do you think I could forget you for an hour, wherever you were?"

"Oh yes," she said, steadily, "I know you would forget me—if I wasn't here. I'm sure of it. You're very ambitious, William—more than you know. You'll soon care—"

"More for politics than for you? Another of your delusions, Kitty. Nothing of the sort. Moreover, if you will only let me advise you—trust your husband a

The Marriage of William Ashe

little—think both for him and yourself. I see nothing either in politics or in our life together that cannot be retrieved."

He spoke with manly kindness and reasonableness. Not a trace of his habitual indolence or indifference. Kitty, listening, was conscious of the most tempestuous medley of feelings—love, remorse, shame, and a strange gnawing desolation. What else, what better *could* she have asked of him? And yet, as she looked at him, she thought suddenly of the moonlit garden at Grosville Park, and of that young, headlong chivalry with which he had thrown himself at her feet. This man before her, so much older and maturer, counting the cost of his marriage with her in the light of experience, and magnanimously, resolutely paying it—Kitty, in a flash, realized his personality as she had never yet done, his moral independence of her, his separateness as a human being. Her passionate self-love instinctively, unconsciously, had made of his life the appendage of hers. And now—? His devotion had never been so plain, so attested; and all the while bitter, terrifying voices rang upon the inner ear, voices of fate, vague and irrevocable.

She dropped into a chair beside his table, trembling and white.

"No, no," she said, drawing her handkerchief across her eyes, with a gesture of childish misery, "it's all been a—a horrid mistake. Your mother was quite right. Of course she hated your marrying me—and now—now she'll see what I've done. I guess perfectly what she's thinking about me to-day! And I can't help it—I shall go on—if you let me stay with you. There's a twist—a black drop in me. I'm not like other people."

The Marriage of William Ashe

Her voice, which was very quiet, gave Ashe intolerable pain.

"You poor, tired, starved child," he said, kneeling down beside her. "Put your arms round my neck. Let me carry you up-stairs."

With a sob she did as she was told. Ashe's library a comparatively late addition to the rambling, old-fashioned house, communicated by a small staircase at the back with his dressing-room above. He lifted the small figure with ease, and half-way up-stairs he impetuously kissed the delicate cheek.

"I'm glad you're not Polly Lyster, darling!"

Kitty laughed through her tears. Presently he deposited her on the large sofa in her own room, and stood beside her, panting a little.

"It's all very well," said Kitty, as she nestled down among the pillows, "but we're *none* of us feathers!"

Her eyes were beginning to recover a little of their sparkle. She looked at him with attention.

"You look horribly tired. What—what did you do—last night?" She turned away from him.

"I sat up reading—then went to sleep down-stairs. I thought the coach had come to grief, and you were somewhere with the Alcots."

"If I had known that," she murmured, "*I* might have gone to sleep. Oh, it was so horrible—the little stuffy room, and the dirty blankets." She gave a shiver of disgust. "There was a poor baby, too, with whooping-cough. Lucky I had some money. I gave the woman a sovereign. But she wasn't at all nice—she never smiled once. I know she thought I was a bad lot."

Then she sprang up.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Sit there!" She pointed to the foot of the sofa. Ashe obeyed her.

"When did you know?"

"About the ministry? Between six and seven. I saw Lady Parham afterwards driving in St. James's Street. She never enjoyed anything so much in her life as the bow she gave me."

Kitty groaned, and subsided again, a little crumpled form among her cushions.

"Tell me the names."

Ashe gave her the list of the ministry. She made one or two shrewd or bitter comments upon it. He fully understood that in her inmost mind she was registering a vow of vengeance against the Parhams; but she made no spoken threat. Meanwhile, in the background of each mind there lay that darker and more humiliating fact, to which both shrank from returning, while yet both knew that it must be faced.

There was a knock at the door, and Blanche appeared with the tray which had been ordered down-stairs. She glanced in astonishment at her mistress.

"We had an accident on the river last night, Blanche," said Kitty. "Come back in half an hour. I'm too tired to change just yet."

She kept her face hidden from the maid, but when Blanche had departed, Ashe saw that her cheeks were flaming.

"I hate lying!" she said, with a kind of physical disgust—"and now I suppose it will be my chief occupation for weeks."

It was true that she hated lying, and Ashe was well aware of it. Of such a battle-stroke, indeed, as she had

The Marriage of William Ashe

played at the ball, when her prompt falsehood snatched Cliffe from Mary Lyster, she was always capable. But in general her pride, her very egotism and quick temper kept her true.

Perhaps the fact represented one of those deep sources whence the well of Ashe's tenderness was fed. At any rate, consciously or not, it was at this moment one of his chief motives for not finding the past intolerable or the future without hope. He took some wine and a sandwich from the tray, and began to feed her. In the middle, she pushed his hands away, and her eyes brimmed again with tears.

"Put it down," she commanded. And when he had done so, she raised his hands deliberately, one after the other, and kissed them, crying:

"William!—I have been a horrible wife to you!"

"Don't be a goose, Kitty. You know very well that—till this last business— And don't imagine that I feel myself a model, either!"

"No," she said, with a long sigh. "Of course, you ought to have beaten me."

He smiled, with an unsteady lip.

"Perhaps I might still try it."

She shook her head.

"Too late. I am not a child any more."

Then throwing her soft arms round his neck, she clung to him, saying the most adorable and poignant things, dissolved, indeed, in a murmuring anguish of remorse; until, with the same unexpectedness as before, she again disengaged herself—urging, insisting that he should send her away.

"Let me go and live at Haggart, baby and I." (Hag-

The Marriage of William Ashe

gart was one of the Tranmore "places," recently handed over to the young people.) "You can come and see me sometimes. I'll garden—and write books. Half the smart women I know write stories—or plays. Why shouldn't I?"

"Why, indeed? Meanwhile, madam, I take you to Scotland—next week."

"Scotland?" She pressed her hands over her eyes. "Anywhere—anywhere—out of the world!"

"Kitty!" Startled by the abandonment of her words, Ashe caught her hands and held them. "Kitty!—you regret—"

"That man? Do I?" She opened her eyes, frowning. "I loathe him! When I think of yesterday, I could drown myself. If I could pile the whole world between him and me—I would. But"—she shivered—"but yet—if he were sitting there—"

"You would be once more under the spell?" said Ashe, bitterly.

"Spell!" she repeated, with scorn. Then snatching her hands from his, she threw back the hair from her temples with a wild gesture. "I warned you," she said—"I warned you."

"A man doesn't pay much attention to those warnings, Kitty."

"Then it is not my fault. I don't know what's wrong with me," she said, sombrely; "but I remember saying to you that sometimes my brain was on fire. I seem to be always in a hurry—in a desperate, desperate hurry!—to know or to feel something—while there is still time—before one dies. There is always a passion—always an effort. More life—*more life!*—even if it lead to pain—and agony—and tears."

The Marriage of William Ashe

She raised her strange, beautiful eyes, which had at the moment almost a look of delirium, and fixed them on his face. But Ashe's impression was that she did not see him.

He was conscious of the same pang, the same sudden terror that he had felt on that never-to-be-forgotten evening when she had talked to him of the mask in the "Tempest." He thought of the Blackwater stories he had heard from Lord Grosville. "*Mad, my dear fellow, mad!*"—the old man's frequent comment ran through his memory. Was there, indeed, some unsound spot in Kitty?

He sat dumb and paralyzed for a moment; then, recovering himself, he said, as he recaptured the cold little hands:

"'More *light*,' Kitty, was what Goethe said, in dying. A better prayer, don't you think?"

There was a strong, even a stern insistence in his manner which quieted Kitty. Her face as it came back to full consciousness was exquisitely sweet and mournful.

"That's the prayer of the *calm*," she said, in a whisper, "and my nature is hunger and storm. And Geoffrey Cliffe is the same. That's why I couldn't help being—"

She sprang up.

"William, don't let's talk nonsense. I can't ever see that man again. How's it to be done?"

She moved up and down—all practical energy and impatience—her mood wholly altered. His own adapted itself to hers.

"For the present, fear nothing," he said, dryly. "For

The Marriage of William Ashe

his own sake Cliffe will hold his tongue and leave London. And as to the future—I can get some message conveyed to him—by a man he won't disregard. Leave it to me."

"You can't write to him, William!" cried Kitty, passionately.

"Leave it to me," he repeated. "Then suppose you take the boy—and Margaret French—to Haggart till I can join you?"

"And your mother?" she said, timidly, coming to stand beside him and laying a hand on each shoulder.

"Leave that also to me."

"How she'll hate the sight of me," she said, under her breath. Then, with another tone of voice—"How long, William, do you give the government?"

"Six months, perhaps—perhaps less. I don't see how they can last beyond February."

"And then—we'll *fight*!" said Kitty, with a long breath, smoothing back the hair from his brow.

"Allow me, please, to command the forces! Well, now then, I must be off!" He tried to rise, but she still held him.

"Did you have any breakfast, William?"

"I don't remember."

"Sit still and eat one of my sandwiches." She divided one into strips, and standing over him began to feed him. A knock at the door arrested her.

"Don't move!" she said, peremptorily, before she ran to open the door.

"Please, my lady," said Blanche, "Lady Tranmore would like to see you."

The Marriage of William Ashe

Kitty started and flushed. She looked round uncertainly at Ashe.

"Ask her ladyship to come up," said Ashe, quietly. The maid departed.

"Feed me if you want to, Kitty," said Ashe, still seated.

Kitty returned, her breath hurried, her step wavering. She looked doubtfully at Ashe—then her eyes sparkled—as she understood. She dropped on her knees beside him, kissing the sleeve of his coat, against which her cheek was pressed—in a passion of repentance.

He bent towards her, touching her hair, murmuring over her. His mind meanwhile was torn with feelings which, so to speak, observed each other. This thing which had happened was horribly serious—important. It might easily have wrecked two lives. Had he dealt with it as he ought—made Kitty feel the gravity of it?

Then the optimist in him asked impatiently what was "the good of exaggerating the damned business"? That fellow has got his lesson—could be driven headlong out of his life and Kitty's henceforward. And how could *he* doubt the love shown in this clinging penitence, these soft kisses? How would the Turk theory of marriage, please, have done any better? Kitty had had her own wild way. No fiat from without had bound her; but love had brought her to his feet. There was something in him which triumphed alike in her revolt and her submission.

Meanwhile, in the cool drawing-room to which the green *persiennes* gave a pleasant foreign look, Lady Tranmore had been waiting for the maid's return. She

The Marriage of William Ashe

shrank from every sound in the house; from her own reflection in Kitty's French mirrors; from her own thoughts most of all.

Lady Edith Manley—at Holland House—had been the most innocent of gossips. A little lady who did no wrong herself—and thought no wrong of others; as white-minded and unsuspecting as a convent child. "Poor Lady Kitty! Something seemed to have gone wrong with the Alcots' coach, and they were somehow divided from all their party. I can't remember exactly what it was they said, but Mr. Cliffe was confident they would catch their train. Though my boy—you remember my boy? they've just put him in the eight!—thought they were running it *rather* fine."

Then, five minutes later, in the supper-room, Lady Tranmore had run across Madeleine Alcot's husband, who had given her in passing the whole story of the frustrated expedition—Mrs. Alcot's chill, and the despatch of Cliffe to Hill Street. "Horrid bore to have to put it off! Hope he got there in time to stop Lady Kitty getting ready. Oh, thanks, Madeleine's all right."

And then no more, as the rush of the crowd swept them apart.

After that, sleep had wholly deserted Lady Tranmore—if, indeed, after the publication of the cabinet list in the afternoon, and William's letter following upon it, any had been still possible. And in the early morning she had sent her note to Kitty—a *ballon d'essai*, despatched in a horror of great fear.

"Her ladyship has not yet returned." The message from Hill Street, delivered by the footman's indifferent mouth, struck Lady Tranmore with trembling.

The Marriage of William Ashe

"Where is William?" she said to herself, in anguish. "I must find him—but—what shall I say to him?" Then she went up-stairs, and, without calling for her maid, put on her walking things with shaking hands.

She slipped out unobserved by her household, and took a hansom from the corner of Grosvenor Street. In the hansom she carefully drew down her veil, with the shrinking of one on whom disgrace—the long pursuing, long expected—has seized at last. All the various facts, statements, indications as to Kitty's behavior, which through the most diverse channels had been flowing steadily towards her for weeks past, were now surging through her mind and memory—a grievous, damning host. And every now and then, as she caught the placards in the streets, her heart contracted anew. Her son, her William, in what should have been the heyday of his gifts and powers, baffled, tripped up, defeated!—by his own wife, the selfish, ungrateful, reckless child on whom he had lavished the undeserved treasures of the most generous and untiring love. And had she not only checked or ruined his career—was he to be also dishonored, struck to the heart?

She could scarcely stand as she rang the bell at Hill Street, and it was only with a great effort that she could ask her question:

"Is Mr. Ashe at home?"

"Mr. Ashe, my lady, is, I believe, just going out," said Wilson. "Her ladyship arrived just about an hour ago, and that detained him."

Elizabeth betrayed nothing. The training of her class held good.

"Are they in the library?" she asked—"or up-stairs?"

The Marriage of William Ashe

Wilson replied that he believed her ladyship was in her room, and Mr. Ashe with her.

"Please ask Mr. Ashe if I can see him for a few minutes."

Wilson disappeared, and Lady Tranmore stood motionless, looking round at William's books and tables. She loved everything that his hand had touched, every sign of his character—the prize books of his college days, the pictures on the wall, many of which had descended from his Eton study, the photographs of his favorite hunter, the drawing she herself had made for him of his first pony.

On his writing-table lay a despatch-box from the Foreign Office. Lady Tranmore turned away from it. It reminded her intolerably of the shock and defeat of the day before. During the past six months she had become more rejoicingly conscious than ever before of his secret, deepening ambition, and her own heart burned with the smart of his disappointment. No one else, however, should guess at it through her. No sooner had she received his letter from the club than, after many weeks of withdrawal from society, she had forced herself to go to the Holland House party, that no one might say she hid herself, that no one might for an instant suppose that any hostile act of such a man as Lord Parham, or any malice of that low-minded woman, could humiliate her son or herself.

Suddenly she saw Kitty's gloves—Kitty's torn and soiled gloves—lying on the floor. She clasped her trembling hands, trying to steady herself. Husband and wife were together. What tragedy was passing between them?

The Marriage of William Ashe

Of course there *might* have been an accident; her thoughts might be all mistake and illusion. But Lady Tranmore hardly allowed herself to encourage the alternative of hope. It was like Kitty's audacity to have come back. Incredible!—unfathomable!—like all she did.

"Her ladyship says, my lady, would you please go up to her room?"

The message was given in Blanche's timid voice. Lady Tranmore started, looked at the girl, longed to question her, and had not the courage. She followed mechanically, and in silence. Could she, must she face it? Yes—for her son's sake. She prayed inwardly that she might meet the ordeal before her with Christian strength and courage.

The door opened. She saw two figures in the pretty, bright-colored room, William sat astride upon a chair in front of Kitty, who, like some small mother-bird, hovered above him, holding what seemed to be a tiny strip of bread-and-butter, which she was dropping with dainty deliberation into his mouth. Her face, in spite of the red and swollen eyes, was alive with fun, and Ashe's laugh reflected hers. The domesticity, the intimate affection of the scene—before these things Elizabeth Tranmore stood gasping.

"Dearest mother!" cried Ashe, starting up.

Kitty turned. At sight of Lady Tranmore she hung back; her smiles departed; her lip quivered.

"William!"—she pursued him and touched him on the shoulder. "I—I can't—I'm afraid. If mother ever means to speak to me again—come and tell me."

The Marriage of William Ashe

And, hiding her face, Kitty escaped like a whirlwind. The dressing-room door closed behind her, and mother and son were left alone.

"Mother!" said Ashe, coming up to her gayly, both hands out-stretched. "Ask me nothing, dear. Kitty has been a silly child—but things will go better now. And as for the Parhams—what does it matter?—come and help me send them to the deuce!"

Lady Tranmore recoiled. For once the good-humor of that handsome face—pale as the face was—seemed to her an offence—nay, a disgrace. That what had happened had been no mere *contretemps*, no mere accident of trains and coaches, was plain enough from Kitty's eyes—from all that William did *not* say, no less than from what he said. And still this levity!—this inconceivable levity! Was it true, as she knew was said, that William had no high sense of honor, that he failed in delicacy and dignity?

In reality, it was the same cry as the Dean's—upon another and smaller occasion. But in this case it was unspoken. Lady Tranmore dropped into a chair, one hand abandoned to her son, the other hiding her face. He talked fast and tenderly, asking her help—neither of them quite knew for what—her advice as to the move to Haggart—and so forth. Lady Tranmore said little. But it was a bitter silence; and if Ashe himself failed in indignation, his mother's protesting heart supplied it amply.

1.1.2

